

PLANET

stories



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SWORD OF THE SEVEN SUNS

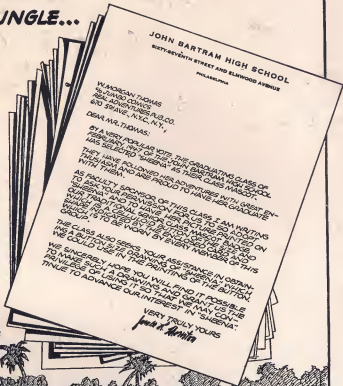
Dead was the Machine-God.
So the men of Klarg reverted
to the Era of the Sword.

A future-world novelet
by **GARDNER F. FOX**

Also **WALTON
BRADBURY
HASSE
WELLS**

SHIENA

QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE...



JOHN BARTRAM HIGH SCHOOL
NORTH SEVENTH STREET AND ELWOOD AVENUE
PHILADELPHIA

W. MORRIS THOMAS
16 JUMBO COMICS
284 ADVENTURES PUB. CO.
670 39 AVE., N.Y.C., N.Y.

DEAR MR. THOMAS:

BY A VERY POPULAR VOTE, THE GRADUATING CLASS OF
SEVENTH YEAR OF THE JOHN BARTRAM HIGH SCHOOL
HAS SELECTED "SHIENA" AS THEIR CLASS MASCOT.
THEY HAVE FOLLOWED HER ADVENTURES WITH GREAT EN-
THUSIASM AND ARE PROUD TO HAVE HER GRADUATE
WITH THEM.
AS FACULTY SPOKESMAN OF THIS CLASS, I AM WRITING
TO ASK YOUR PERMISSION FOR US TO SO ADAPT
"SHIENA" AND TO HAVE HER PICTURE PRINTED ON
OUR TRADITIONAL GRADUATION PROGRAM. THE COST OF SUCH
IMAGE IS A NECESSITY OF THE GRADUATING CLASS AND
WOMEN ARE TO BE WORN BY EVERY MEMBER OF THIS
GROUP.
THE CLASS ALSO SEES YOUR ASSISTANCE IN OBTAIN-
ING A FURTHER SET OF COPIES OF "SHIENA" WHICH
WE COULD USE IN THE PRINTING OF THE BOOK.
WE SINCERELY HOPE YOU WILL FIND IT POSSIBLE
TO MAKE SUCH A DRAWING AND GRANT US THE
PRIVILEGE OF USING IT SO THAT WE MAY CON-
TINUE TO ADVANCE OUR INTEREST IN "SHIENA".

VERY TRULY YOURS
Paul H. Smith

THAT'S WHAT I LIKE
ABOUT THE JUNGLE.
QUIET. PEACE. QUIET.
NOBODY* KNOWS WE
EVEN EXIST!

CHEE...CHEE!



*NOBODY EXCEPT THE HALF
MILLION READERS, BOB, WHO
SHARE SHIENA'S ADVENTURES
IN EVERY ISSUE OF
JUMBO COMICS!

PLANET STORIES



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With a wrench, Gavin jerked free!

Beyond The Yellow Fog

By EMMETT McDOWELL

"It is the little death," they whispered. "When that yellow mist starts creeping, you'll wish you were dead, sir." Gavin Murdock, hardened manhunter, coldly eyed the evil miasma rising through the mystery space-ship and braced himself for unguessable horror . . .

THE MARTIAN sniffed. "Frankly, Mr. Murdock, your account of yourself is laconic to say the least."

Gavin Murdock grunted, his eyes wary and unblinking. He didn't reply.

The Martian raised his eyes from the documents spread on his glassite desk.

He gave the sandy-haired Murdock a shrewd penetrating glance and smiled dryly.

"Of course, we get very few men in the slave trade who care to talk about themselves. We take that into consideration, Mr. Murdock. But an astro-engineer

of your talents . . ." He glanced again at the papers on his desk.

Murdock's pulse hammered suddenly in his throat. He swallowed dryly, but he still didn't interrupt.

"This discharge," the Martian went on. "I see you were employed as first assistant engineer on the luxury liner *Cosmos*. That's United Spaceway's crack ship. Would you care to tell me, Mr. Murdock, what persuaded you to apply for this post on the *Nova*?"

"Blacklisted," Mr. Murdock said succinctly. "Belted the old man in the nose. I've been on the beach here in Venusport ever since. None of the shipping lines'll touch me." He lapsed into silence again.

The Martian drummed long white fingers on the desk top.

"You realize, Mr. Murdock, that when you sign the *Nova's* articles you forfeit your citizenship on Terra? The Earth Congress issued a proclamation to the effect that any Terran employed in the slave trade . . ."

"What d'you expect me to do?" Murdock interrupted with a wry expression. He was a tall angular man in his early thirties. "Rot here on Venus? I'm not thrilled at taking a third's rating aboard a Jovian slaver. But it's a job."

The Martian still hesitated, doubt registering on his paper-white, sharply-chiseled features.

At length he said, "Very well," in a dry tone. "You'll have to go to the Commissioner's and sign the articles this afternoon. The *Nova* sails tomorrow. I'll give you your orders in writing."

But he made no move to do so.

Gavin Murdock stiffened imperceptibly, an alarm pealing in his brain. The Martian, he sensed, was stalling. For what?

THE SPACE PATROLS, Murdock knew, had been making things plenty hot for the slavers. The Empire had outlawed the slave trade three years ago. Her spacers were stamping out the traffic in Jovian Dawn Men which flowed between Jupiter and Venus where slavery was still legalized. Decadent the Empire might be, but she still controlled space. Any slaver caught with his half-human cattle beyond Venus' thousand mile limit was treated as a pirate.

The Martian was saying, "You understand, Mr. Murdock, there's no regular salary connected with this job, but as third assistant-engineer you'll be entitled to a one-twentieth share of the profits of each voyage."

Gavin nodded. His glance flicked about the blank walls. He felt suddenly like an animal in a trap.

The offices of Josiah Cabot, slaver, of whom the Martian was the business representative in Venusport, were on the eighty-seventh floor, well up in the swirling cloud blanket which sheathed the second planet like a glove. The offices were windowless and sound-proof. With an effort, Gavin put down the panic rising in his throat. It was ridiculous to think they could do anything to him in a modern office building here in Venusport.

A buzzer on the desk whirled. The Martian leaned forward and snapped a switch. A girl's voice said, "There's a call for you on the televisor, Mr. Trev. It's the—"

"Switch it to the radiophone," the Martian interrupted. He picked up the phone. "Trev speaking."

Gavin could hear the metallic rattle of a voice in the old fashioned instrument.

Trev said, "Yes . . . yes . . . thank you," at intervals, and hung up. His black eyes were inscrutable. He turned back to Gavin, saying, "I've been waiting for that call, Mr. Murdock."

He brought his hand into sight above the desk. Gavin Murdock found himself staring into the muzzle of a wicked poisoned-needle automatic!

"Clasp your hands behind your neck, Mr. Murdock. That was United Spaceways. They have no record of your ever having been employed by them. That was a very foolish lie, Mr. Murdock. Please submit yourself to a search."

Gavin drew a long breath. "You can save yourself the trouble. The discharge is forged. I haven't had a ship in three years."

"Stand up."

Gavin unfolded himself awkwardly and rose to his full six feet, two inches. He was clad in plain gray shorts and blouse. A Terran of Scotch-American descent, his face was thin, hollow-cheeked, freckled. His sandy hair had been close-cropped in

the military fashion. His pale blue eyes were as bright and restless as a hawk's. He had a thin, arched nose, a tight-lipped mouth and a square jaw. He made no attempt to protest further.

The Martian came around the desk to approach Gavin from behind and jam the needle gun against his back. "Don't move!"

"Hell," said Gavin, "I'm not even breathing."

He heard the panel, which led into the outer office, squeak as it was slid back. A new voice asked, "What's the trouble, Trev?" It was a cold, clipped voice, yet the words were strangely blurred.

Gavin could feel his palms grow damp against the back of his neck. He wanted to whip around, but the Martian still had the dart gun clamped against his spine.

Trev said, "No trouble, Captain Cabot."

GAVIN turned his head slowly in the direction of the voice. He saw a tall man with a lean wolfish face. The man, in handsome black shorts, was standing in the doorway to the outer office, one hand braced against the frame. Just behind the man, peering wide-eyed over his shoulder, was a girl.

"Don't allow us to disturb you," said the man and, waving his companion inside, closed the door. He came stiffly, a little unsteadily, around in front and seated himself in Trev's chair. He was drunk, Gavin realized, drunk as a lord. The girl stood against the wall.

"Not at all, Captain Cabot," said Trev to the newcomer, in a faintly sarcastic voice. "After all it's for your own protection." He patted Gavin's chest, found a small flat dart-gun no larger than a deck of cards. It was secured in a delicate spring clip—strapped beneath his left arm.

"Lethal toy for a legitimate spaceman to be carting around," observed the Martian. "Hand tailored, isn't it?"

When Gavin didn't reply, he added, "He's wearing a plastic dart-proof vest too."

The Captain frowned. "What's the trouble, Trev?"

Trev said, "Mr. Murdock, here, applied for the job as third assistant-engineer on your ship with a forged discharge

from United Spaceways. United Spaceways never heard of him."

"Hmmm," said Cabot.

The Martian's long questing fingers continued the search. He discovered Gavin's money belt, unbudded it, tossed it to the Captain.

"Who do you think he is?" asked Cabot in that faintly blurred voice.

"I don't know," replied Trev. "Take a look in his money belt."

The Captain, frowning in concentration, unzipped the pockets with painful care. They held four hundred inter-planetary credits, but that was all.

Without commenting, Trev began to turn Gavin's pockets inside out, bringing to light coins, cigarettes and a lighter.

"What are these?" The Martian came around in front again. He threw a pair of brass knuckles to the desk top.

"Knucks," explained Gavin with a tight grin. "Antiques. But I've a fondness for 'em. Silent. Efficient."

Trev regarded them with distaste. The Captain, on the contrary, looked interested. Gavin couldn't see how the girl reacted as she was sitting almost out of his angle of vision.

The girl puzzled him. She was an unknown factor. He had never heard of her. Cabot, he had placed at once: Master of the *Nova*, which of all the slaveships was giving the Terran patrols the biggest headache. But the girl. Who was she? Where did she fit in the picture? She was a strikingly beautiful girl, that much he had seen in the momentary glance he had caught of her. Then she had moved out of his vision.

"Who are you?" the Martian asked Gavin bluntly.

"You've got my papers there on the desk. Only the discharge is faked."

"You said you hadn't had a ship in three years. Why?"

"The Commission suspended my license for a year."

"Why?"

Gavin could feel the sweat prickle his forehead. His hands clasped about the back of his neck grew clammy again. He drew a long breath. "Smuggling colonial into Terra. I was chief engineer aboard the Europa. She was one of Transplanet Lines' ships. I was lucky to get off with

a suspension. But after the scandal I found I couldn't get a berth."

"So!" said the Martian.

Gavin heard the girl draw a sharp breath.

Captain Cabot leaned forward quickly from the waist, his narrow brown eyes boring into Gavin's.

Colonel was the most vicious drug known in the System. Extracted from a Ganymedian plant, it lifted its devotees into a special paradise for a few short years; then blind raving insanity inexorably followed its use. Transplanet Lines had been in reality a powerful ring of wholesale smugglers. Agents of the Terrestrial Intelligence Service had finally smashed the ring. The company had ceased to exist; its high officials having been sent to prison, its ships and records confiscated.

"So," Trev repeated softly. There was a cat-like expression of triumph on his sharp pale features. "Then you and Miss Petrovna must have known each other. Miss Petrovna was third mate aboard the *Galaxy*, another of Transplanet's ships."

GAVIN felt his stomach go hollow. He faced the girl, his hands still clasped grotesquely behind his neck, and forced himself to observe her coolly.

He saw a girl with skin almost as white as a Martian. Her lustrous black hair was combed back severely from a high white forehead, parted in the center, and done in a knot at the nape of her neck. Her long black eyes were half-hidden by thick black lashes. She was wearing white shorts and blouse, the universal daytime dress of Venus.

Gavin turned back to the Martian and said in a stony voice, "I sailed with Transplanet for seven years. I never heard of a Miss Petrovna!"

The girl bit her lip, brought her hand up to her high virginal breasts. The Martian looked puzzled. Captain Cabot frowned.

It was the girl who recovered first from Gavin's unexpected flank attack. She said easily to Gavin, "That's quite possible, Mr. Murdock. You were chief engineer of the *Europa*. That was Transplanet's finest ship. The *Galaxy* was only a tramp freighter, and I was just a green third

mate." Her voice was low, husky. "But I remember you, Mr. Murdock." She gave an amused laugh. "In fact, I had a crush on you!"

Gavin Murdock's jaw dropped. He stared at the girl in utter astonishment, unable to believe his ears.

"Oh," said the girl, reading his disbelief in his gaunt, freckled features, "I wouldn't have dared put myself forward. I worshipped from afar. I was only eighteen, just out of school."

The Martian interrupted, "Sit down, Mr. Murdock." The lines of suspicion had faded from his forehead. "Sit down. You may drop your hands. What have you been doing since then?"

Gavin sank weakly into his chair. He didn't reply. Captain Cabot was regarding Miss Petrovna with an alert expression. The film of drunkenness, Gavin sensed, had been banished from the Captain's brain like a fog by a ray of sunlight.

The Martian said, "Never mind. It's not important. Once we're satisfied with a man, we don't delve too deeply into his activities. Here, you can have your gear back."

As Gavin stowed the articles in place, the Martian wrote out his pass and shoved it across the desk. "Take this to the Commissioners. It'll authorize you to sign the *Nova*'s articles."

Gavin stood up, zipping the pass in his money belt. Captain Cabot got to his feet also and thrust out his hand. "Glad to have a man of your ability with us on the *Nova*, Murdock. Miss Petrovna is our third mate. You'll be on the same watch."

The Captain's tone was dry and formal, lacking cordiality. There was, Gavin sensed, no cordiality in the man. He was as devoid of emotion as a block of stone.

The girl said, "Nadia Petrovna's the name, Mr. Murdock." She too had stood up and now extended her hand. When Gavin took it, she smiled, exposing small brilliant white teeth. "The officers of the *Nova* are celebrating the sailing at the Temple of Joy tonight. You'll be there, won't you, Mr. Murdock?" There was a twinkle in her long black eyes. "We've a lot to talk over."

"I wouldn't miss it," Gavin assured her dryly.

When Gavin Murdock reached the

street, he leaned weakly against the lichen-covered wall of the office building and blew out his breath. Still not trusting himself to think, he hailed a robot cab. As the taxi darted out into the traffic, he relaxed limply into the yielding flexoplas cushions.

It had been touch and go, he reflected, but in a few minutes he would be signing the *Nova's* articles before the Interplanet Commissioner.

A grin lit his bony freckled face. With the girl vouching for him, the slavers would never be able to disprove his story. Transplanet was no longer in existence; its records were in the secret files of the Terrestrial Intelligence Service.

He ought to know, he thought grimly; he, Gavin Murdock, was the T.I.S. agent who had broken the colonial smuggling ring.

Gavin chuckled. Nadia Petrovna's lie had been superb, especially that touch about having had a crush on him. That had been pure artistry. It had carried absolute conviction.

But why had she done it?

Gavin's amusement gave way to misgivings. He was a special agent of the T.I.S. He had been assigned to the Jovian slave trade for two reasons. He wasn't known on Venus or Jupiter. But, more important, he had been an astro-engineer on a Tri-World ship before joining the T.I.S.

He had never been employed by Transplanet, though. He didn't know Nadia Petrovna from Eve!

Then why had she lied?

The robot cab drew up to the curb, stopped, said in a harsh metallic voice, "Offices of the Interplanetary Commission," and the door opened automatically.

II

THE LIGHT, filtering through Venus' eternal cloud blanket, was a soft gray, not intense enough to cast shadows. Gavin Murdock noted the phenomena with a frown as he walked along the Street of Sorrows.

In the center of the block, he paused suddenly, lit a cigarette. His eyes, darting across the lighter's flame, searched the crooked twilight street behind him. He was

just in time to see a figure flatten itself in a doorway.

Gavin's lips tightened. Ever since leaving the Commissioner's he had been conscious of being followed. There had been a man on the corner below his window when he packed his luggage and sent it off to the *Nova*. The same man had been loitering near the corner as he set off for the Temple of Joy to meet the officers.

He certainly didn't intend to tip his hand by communicating with the T.I.S. Commandant Samuels would know that he had accomplished the first step of that intricate plan, hatched in the head offices of the Terrestrial Intelligence Service, when they saw his name on the *Nova's* articles.

He allowed his glance to travel about the street. He was in the Old Port district. Once it had been the heart of the city, but, the big space lines having built a new field on the bogs of Antram just north of Venusport, the crumbling rocket blast pits of Old Port were no longer used except by slavers, smugglers and a few tramp freighters.

He turned abruptly on his heel and resumed his course toward the Temple of Joy. Let them trail him; they'd learn nothing for their pains.

From the Street of Sorrows, he emerged into Venner Square. The statue of August Venner, the first Terrestrial to bridge the void and set foot on Venus, rose green with mold in the center of the plaza.

It began to drizzle.

Gavin glanced at his watch. In a few minutes it would be dark. Already the fungus, lichens and mosses creeping up the face of the buildings were radiating a greenish phosphorescent glow. He quickened his pace across the square. As he entered Mercury Alley, he glanced back.

The figure was furtively skirting the statue.

The alley ahead was deserted. It was a blind alley and at the head of it was The Temple of Joy where the officers of the *Nova* would be beginning their night's carousal.

A frown made two vertical furrows between Gavin's sandy brows. Then a movement at the other end of Mercury Alley caught his attention. Two men were bear-

ing down on him. They came ahead in the open, but with caution.

A shiver of apprehension coursed up Gavin's spine. He spun around. The shadow behind him was no longer furtive. He too was closing in warily. Both exits of the alley were closed. Except for a single bar, the buildings on either hand were dark and silent. Trap!

The bar should have a rear exit. Gavin wheeled suddenly and plunged through the door. A barmaid industriously polishing the plastic bar glanced up as Gavin slammed the door. There was one customer, a Terran, seated at a corner table. He smiled at Gavin. "Won't you have a seat, Mr. Murdock?"

Gavin halted in mid-stride to regard the man in utter astonishment. He was a nondescript-looking fellow, middle-aged, with a slight black mustache.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Murdock?" he repeated genially. "I was beginning to fear you'd never arrive."

The girl crossed silently to the door and bolted it.

Gavin's bewilderment gave way rapidly to caution. His pale blue eyes narrowed; his face hardened. He had been herded into the bar, he realized, like a horse into a corral.

"Sit down," urged the middle-aged man for the third time. "What'll you have?"

GAVIN reached a decision. He sat down with his back to the wall so that he could keep both the door and the barmaid under observation and said, "Bourbon."

"Fetch the gentleman bourbon, Meg," said the middle-aged man in a pleasant voice.

The girl brought a bottle of Terran whiskey and a glass, placing them on the table before Gavin. She was a buxom blonde with hard, unsmiling blue eyes and hard, painted features. Her violet shorts fit too tight and she was wearing the sketchiest kind of halter around her full breasts.

Gavin poured himself a drink and waited.

"You're wondering, no doubt," began the middle-aged man, "how we knew who you were and the route you'd take." He smiled briefly. "We have our ways of

knowing, Mr. Murdock. Let me assure you that, before we decided to approach you, we made a complete examination of your record. For instance, you were chief engineer of the *Europa*. That was vital. We had to have a man with a technical knowledge of space drives."

Gavin allowed consternation to register on his face, but thought, *A good bluff—if I had been chief engineer of the Europa!* The middle-aged man, he realized, was only parroting the misinformation he had given Trev, the Martian. Obviously, he had learned about Gavin from either Trev or that girl, Nadia Petrovna. Captain Cabot wouldn't be apt to double-cross himself and this had all the earmarks of treachery.

Gavin drank and asked, "Well?"

"You're an astro-engineer, Mr. Murdock. We're interested."

"Who's 'we'?"

The middle-aged man pulled out a handkerchief with which to pat his sallow cheeks. "I'm sorry, Mr. Murdock, but I'm not at liberty to reveal that."

Gavin scowled. "Who are you?"

"One alias is as good as another." The man smiled pleasantly. "X will do for the present. Suppose you call me Mr. X. I represent a group, Mr. Murdock, who are interested in the *Nova's* space drive."

"Well?" said Gavin dryly. The group whom Mr. X represented weren't the only ones interested in *Nova's* space-drive. The T.I.S., for one, was particularly concerned about it. The *Nova* made the crossing between Jupiter and Venus with her contraband load of slaves in an impossibly short space of time. The crack patrol ships of the Empire had neither been able to keep the *Nova* in sight nor trap her. Gavin's early experience as an astro-engineer with Tri-World had been the really important reason that he had been assigned to the job.

Mr. X put the tips of his pudgy fingers together. "As third assistant-engineer of the *Nova*, Mr. Murdock, you will have an unrivaled opportunity to study her drive. We're willing to pay and pay handsomely for the secret of that drive."

"How much?"

"A million credits," replied Mr. X, without blinking an eye.

Gavin allowed his breath to escape be-

tween his teeth. He knew now who was behind Mr. X and it didn't make him any happier. Only one of the big corporations on Terra-United Spaceways, General Atomic, Tri-World, or Amalgamated plastic—could offer such a sum. The Gafgantuan companies maintained their own investigation agencies, ruthless, efficient gestapos willing to go to any length to get their hands on valuable discoveries.

He stood up, saying, "I'll think it over."

"I'm afraid you'll have to reach a decision now." X's voice was cold.

Gavin's hard blue eyes went wary.

The T.I.S. maintained in their secret files a complete record of every man and woman engaged in the slave trade. Gavin had studied it thoroughly in preparation for this assignment. Trev, he knew, besides being a broker in slaves for Josiah Cabot, was suspected of dealing in merchandise of a great deal more dangerous character. Scientific secrets.

Trev was a free lance, buying from independent spies and selling to the highest bidder. He was tolerated because the very corporations and governments he stole from were also his patrons. Trev would have connections with all the secret agencies of the different corporations. If anyone were dickering with X to sell the *Nova's* space drive, Trev would be the likeliest suspect. And, if Trev thought Gavin was dickering with X, the Martian wouldn't hesitate to betray him to Cabot.

That was one side.

On the other hand, it might be a trap. His best policy was to have nothing to do with X.

He said, "I don't do business with someone I don't know. I'm going now. Don't try to stop me."

"Meg," said Mr. X.

GAVIN felt the girl's hand seize his shoulders in a grip of steel. She had come up behind him lightly as a cat. Her fingers dug into his arms and held him like a vise. Her buxomness, he realized, in dismay, must be solid muscle.

"Kill him," she advised X over Gavin's shoulder. "He's probably a spy for one of the other companies." She had a harsh metallic voice.

X looked undecided.

Gavin wrenched his shoulders. The girl merely tightened her grip until his biceps felt numb. She smelled strongly of arsiline, a heavy sweetish Martian perfume.

She said over his shoulder again, "Who else but one of their spies would refuse a million credits?"

The shot struck home. X made an expression of distaste and slipped his hand in the pocket of his jacket.

It was no time for gallantry. Gavin snapped back his head. His skull crushed into the girl's face. Her hands loosened. With a wrench, he jerked free and kicked the table in X's lap.

Gavin bounded around the table, pulling his hands from his pockets. Brass knucks gleamed on both fists. X was scrambling up from beneath the debris. Gavin hit him in the temple.

He whirled in time to see the big blonde reaching for him. Gavin had no intention of letting her get her hands on him again. His gleaming knucks caught the girl on the jaw. She folded to the floor, half-across the legs of the unconscious X.

He regarded the pair for a moment, catching his breath. Then he went to the door, shot a bolt and opened it cautiously. The three men who had herded him into the bar were standing just outside.

He backed out, waved negligently and said, "I'll see you later, then," loudly enough for the three men to hear, and closed the door.

The men eyed him coldly. As soon as he was past they trooped inside.

Gavin instantly lit out running at top speed. He didn't slow down until he skidded inside the Temple of Joy half a block away and brought up panting before a startled headwaiter. "Where's the *Nova* party?"

"*Nova* party, sir?"

"Yes, yes," Gavin said impatiently. He changed position so he could keep the entrance in sight. "The officers of the *Nova* are throwing a celebration here tonight. Where are they, man. Speak up."

The waiter looked at Gavin as if he were crazy. "I never heard of them," he said. "There's no such party here."

Gavin's lips thinned. He was silent a

moment, digesting this information. He glanced toward the door. To return now to the street would be fatal. They would be waiting for him. He wasn't safe even here in the lobby of the Temple of Joy. He wanted to mix in with the safety of crowds and lights.

He gave the waiter a bill, saying, "Get me a table then, near the wall."

The waiter's expression changed miraculously. He said, "Yes, sir," and ushered Gavin into the inner sanctum.

A heady, throbbing rhythm beat like surf in Gavin's ears. The light was dim, rosy, intimate. Gavin threaded his way between the seated patrons conscious of laughter, of bare shoulders and arms, of vivid splashes of color.

"Here, sir," said the waiter. Gavin sat down and ordered bourbon.

A Martian girl was executing a barbaric dance in a cleared space in the center of the floor. When the waiter brought Gavin his drink, he sipped it guardedly, dividing his attention between the dancer and the entrance. From the corner of his eye, he saw someone come inside. He turned his head and immediately stiffened.

It was Nadia Petrovna. She was alone.

THE GIRL paused at the edge of the tables, her long black eyes sweeping the room. When they reached Gavin, they halted. She waved and started for his table.

Her costume, Gavin realized, must have been designed individually for Nadia by one of the great Martian fashion artists. Two plates of thinnest rose plastic inlaid with delicate gold lace work had been moulded to conform exactly to her high small breasts. What kept them in place was a mystery—one which Gavin wouldn't have been above solving. A full skirt of rose satin hung low on slim ample hips and fell to the instep of her gold sandals.

He stood up as she approached, holding a chair for her.

She didn't sit down. Her face appeared whiter than when he had last seen her in Trev's office. She said hurriedly, in an undertone.

"Where have you been? The party was cancelled. We've been scouring

Venusport for you. The *Nova* sails in an hour."

"Sit down," said Gavin.

"But . . ." she began and then sank into the chair.

Gavin took his seat, saying "The *Nova* wasn't scheduled to sail until tomorrow."

"I know." Her voice was urgent. "It's an emergency of some sort. I don't know what's happened. Captain Cabot got our clearance from the port of authorities just a few minutes ago. Hurry, please. I've a cab waiting outside." She started to push back from the table.

"We've an hour," said Gavin dryly. His hard blue eyes regarded the girl with a thoughtful stare. There had been no record of this girl in the T.I.S.'s secret file. What did it mean? He wondered again why she had lied for him in Trev's office.

He asked suddenly, "Does the Temple have a back door?"

"I don't know."

"We're going to find out."

He stood up and left money on the table. When Nadia still hesitated, Gavin took her arm lightly but firmly and urged her toward the stage door.

A yellow-skinned Venusian, his green eyes cold as glass, stopped them at the entrance of the passage. "You can't come backstage," he said.

On the dance floor, a flock of girls dressed like Ganymedian natives were performing an orgiastic dance. The drums in the orchestra beat out a sultry rhythm. Gavin reached in his pocket for a bill. A disturbance at the main door caused him to look up quickly.

A man had just entered across the room. It was Mr. X.

Nine men followed X through the door, fanning out among the tables. They were armed with bell-mouthed, Dixon ray rifles.

"Everybody keep your seat!" Mr. X called out sharply.

A woman screamed. The drums stopped. The dancing girls lapsed into a confused huddle.

Instead of a bill, Gavin brought the knucks out of his pocket and clipped the Venusian behind his ear. Snatching the girl's arm, he dragged her through the door.

"Run," he commanded. "Run like hell!" He pushed her down the long dimly lit corridor ahead of them.

Nadia ran. She hiked up her skirts and ran as if the devil himself were after her. Gavin, hard on her heels, caught the reflection of a yellow ray as one of X's men turned loose at the stage door. The sound of screams, shouts and overturned tables pursued them down the corridor.

Gavin caught glimpses of dressing rooms, a scad of Venusian and Terran girls changing costume. He nearly collided with an electronics technician. Then they burst through a small chamber where a wizened Mercurian sat in a chair propped against the wall—and out into the street.

It was the next street over from Mercury Alley, Gavin realized. He hailed a robot cab, piled in with the girl and said, "Pit Nine."

The cab darted away from the curb. Gavin caught a flash of bare leg, stared at Nadia. She was hunched in her corner, her face a dim oval in the darkened interior. She pointed something black at him.

"I've got a dart gun!" Her voice trembled. "Don't move! Or I'll shoot!"

III

GAVIN MURDOCK drew a deep breath. He didn't move. The girl must have carried the gun strapped around her leg above the knee. In that costume it wouldn't have been invisible anywhere else.

He said, "It's your move."

Without answering him, the girl said, "Change of address—Pit Seven."

"Change of address—Pit Seven," the metallic voice of the cab repeated through the speaker overhead.

Gavin felt like a blind man playing chess. He narrowed his pale blue eyes. "Where are we going?"

"The *Nova*." Her voice was unfriendly.

"But the *Nova*'s at Pit Nine."

"Pit Nine's being watched. We're going to use the underground."

Gavin shifted slightly, half-turned towards the girl. "Point that dart gun some other direction," he complained. "My blood's running cold."

She didn't move it.

Gavin's long arm snapped out with the precision of a cat's paw, slapped the gun out of her hands. The girl gasped, "Oh!" snatched for the weapon, but Gavin's hand was already covering it.

The gun in his possession, he asked, "Who's watching the *Nova*?"

"As if you didn't know!"

Gavin considered this, examining the dart gun at the same time. It was a tiny thing, curved to fit the roundness of a leg. Beautiful as a jewel.

"Oddly enough," he returned dryly, "I don't know."

She glared at him through the semi-gloom without replying. The buildings flowed past the windows, the green glow of lichens and moss illuminating the street with about the same intensity as a full moon's light on Terra.

Gavin made his voice cold as he leaned toward the girl. "Do you want me to loosen your tongue for you?" Who's watching the *Nova*?"

Nadia gasped, her hand at her throat. "You know as well as I do. X's men!"

"Who's X?"

"Who's X? You ask that? You went to see him this afternoon. You even made an appointment with him later."

Gavin recalled the words he had spoken for the benefit of X's men as he left the bar—"I'll see you later, then." Captain Cabot was not without his own spy system after all. His estimation of Cabot went up a notch.

"You won't believe this," he said, "but I haven't the foggiest notion who X is. Do you know?"

Nadia's dark eyes looked puzzled. She shook her head, gave a short laugh. "You're going to be a big disappointment to Josiah. I wouldn't care to be in your shoes."

"Josiah . . . oh, you're referring to Captain Cabot. So he expects me to be able to tell him who X represents."

"You were talking to him," said the girl bluntly.

Gavin regarded Nadia a moment. Then he asked, "Why has the sailing been advanced?"

She clamped shut her jaws.

"You don't want me to force you to talk, do you?" suggested Gavin.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?"

Nadia bit her lip. "It doesn't make any difference, I suppose." She shrugged. "You know anyway, if you're working for X. Captain found out that some powerful clique is trying to have the *Nova* interned. He rushed his clearance through before they had time to act." She paused before adding, "X has bought off Trev."

So it was the Martian who had sold out, not Nadia. He handed back the girl's dart gun. "Here. See if you can't behave yourself now."

Nadia took the weapon. She pointed it deliberately at Gavin's chest. "Please clasp your hands behind your neck!"

THE robot cab drew up at the curb. The door opened. It's voice issued from the loudspeaker. "Pit Seven."

"Get out," Nadia ordered. "Stand back from the door."

Gavin slid out. The buildings were gone, replaced by a wall of structural concrete which disappeared overhead in the clouds. It had begun to rain again, a clammy drizzle. The girl followed him to the curb, shivering as the drops hit her bare shoulders and back.

A green-lighted sign over a door in the concrete wall read:

PIT SEVEN—PASSENGER ENTRANCE

"In there." She motioned at the door.

Gavin, a step in advance, ducked inside and went ahead down a long incline until he fetched up in a mouldy unused waiting room.

"Take the door to the left."

A sign above it read:

MANAGEMENT—PRIVATE

At the girl's direction, Gavin passed through bare offices, smelling of stale air and mildew and into a narrow corridor which led straight as an arrow into the distance in either direction. Walls, ceiling and floor radiated a pale green glow from the fungus.

Gavin, who had been keeping his sense of direction with an effort, realized that the passage led towards Pit Nine. They followed it for a quarter of a mile, passing only one intersecting corridor. They turned in the second passage they met, passed along it a short distance, and came out in the maw of Pit Nine itself.

They were on a balcony a hundred

feet from the floor of the pit. The well below was charred black by countless jet blasts. The *Nova*, a dull black bullet-shaped monster, rested on its jets, towering straight up four hundred feet above them. He saw an airy gangplank sloping from the balcony to an open port in the ship. There was a glum Venusian standing guard at the gangplank.

Urged along by the girl, Gavin ascended the gangplank into the ship itself. "I've heard of shanghai-ing," he remarked over his shoulder. "But this is the first case of being shanghai-ed exactly according to your wishes."

Nadia said, "Captain Cabot will talk to you." She indicated an elevator and they ascended rapidly to the ship's control room.

There were three men in the spacious control room: Captain Cabot, the senior astrogator, and a communications man. They faced about, stared at Gavin as the girl prodded him through the door.

"I found him in the Temple of Joy," said Nadia.

Cabot's glance slid over Gavin. His lean wolfish face cracked into a smile. "I haven't time to question him now—" he began, when the communications man interrupted.

"He's up there!" said the communications man. "Directly overhead. But he's beyond the Heaviside layer. I can't make out his class, but he's big. Feels like a patrol ship."

A frown passed across Cabot's face. He snapped on a televisior. "Engine room," came a faint voice.

Cabot glanced at his watch. "Taking off in ten minutes. There's a ship above the clouds. Don't know who she is. Have all jets primed. We may have to dodge her."

"Check," said the voice.

"And, John," Cabot added, "I've got your third aboard. I don't care to trust him until we get beyond the thousand mile limit, though, so carry on for a while longer."

"Check," said the voice.

Cabot snapped off the televisior and turned to Nadia. "Lock Mr. Murdock in seventeen. Then report back to the bridge."

"Yes sir," said Nadia.

Gavin was led silently below again. He

could hear the rumble of the warming jets. Nadia appeared nervous, jumpy. She wanted to get back to the bridge and an acceleration chair before the take-off, Gavin guessed.

About midway down, she paused before a metal door numbered seventeen, swung it open, disclosing blackness. Gavin stepped inside.

The girl allowed her face to relax. She said in a softer voice, "Lie down. The *Nova's* take-off is pretty rugged. Five G's." The metal door clanged shut.

Gavin heard a bolt snick into place. Blackness, utter impenetrable blackness engulfed him.

He spent precious minutes searching for the light switch, as the roar of the jets whined up an ascending scale. With a grunt of satisfaction, he found them, snapped them on. The cabin flooded with brilliance.

The body of Trev, the Martian was stretched stark and cold on the metal deck!

GAVIN bent shakily over the broker of slaves and scientific secrets. Trev's black eyes were open, glassy. A thin three cornered sliver of metal protruded from his throat. The Martian would never steal the *Nova's* space drive now. He had been shot with a poisoned dart.

Suddenly, a tremendous weight fell on Gavin's shoulders. He was squashed flat to the deck beside the dead Martian, pinned there. The breath was crushed from his chest, and he struggled wildly to inflate his lungs.

The *Nova*, he realized in desperation, was off!

Gavin managed to roll to his belly, push himself to hands and knees. The pressure didn't relax. He crawled to a corner, got his legs braced against a stanchion. If the strange ship above the clouds should prove unfriendly, the *Nova* would be bucking like a crazed steer in her efforts to dodge. Anyone caught unprepared would be flipped from bulkhead to bulkhead until he was a bundle of splintered bones.

The acceleration dragged at Gavin's lean flesh. He looked ten years older in the harsh bright light. Sweat burst from

his pores; his eyelids drooped; his mouth sagged.

Then the whine of the jets ceased. The terrific acceleration relaxed. Gavin felt like a toy balloon.

Consternation widened his pale blue eyes. He gripped himself for the buffeting he was almost sure would follow.

In the silence a wild clamor broke out from stem to stern.

The general alarm!

Gavin tensed. He could feel the pulse drumming in his temples. Then it came. The jets burst into a full throated roar. The *Nova* lurched crazily to the starboard and then swept upward at a tangent.

Again the *Nova* bucked, this time to port. A sickening circular movement took possession of his prison. The ship, he realized, must be above the clouds in the upper stratosphere and climbing higher in tight spirals.

Suddenly the *Nova* gave an uncontrollable lurch. A faint far away explosion reached his ears.

They were being fired at! That was an atomic shell bursting off the starboard bow. Sweat coursed down Gavin's cheeks.

Were they going to let him die in the locked cabin like a trapped rat? The crew could escape in space tenders, if the *Nova* were hit. Another shell burst closer, throwing the gigantic ship sideways as a hurricane tosses a chip.

Something burst in Gavin's brain. He came to his senses, realized he was hammering in berserk terror on the unyielding metal door. His knuckles were streaming blood.

He got a grip on himself, forced himself to sit down again in the corner, back to the bulkhead, feet thrust against the stanchion. The body of the Martian, he saw, was sliding in erratic circles about the deck.

Gavin wet his lips, his blue eyes desperate. He had scarcely settled himself when the third explosion burst. It was so close that there was no sound, only a terrific blast of pressure. The lights dimmed. Gavin was torn from his stanchion and hurled across the cabin against the opposite bulkhead.

Fortunately, he didn't strike the unguarded steel. Instead he was flung against

the Martian's body which acted as a pad. Even so the shock was terrific. Blackness welled up behind his eyes. He lost consciousness.

Gavin opened his eyes and realized he couldn't have been unconscious but a second or two. He sprang to his feet. And struck his head and shoulders on the ceiling!

He gave himself a push from the overhead and floated slowly back to the deck.

Then he realized what was wrong. The jets were quiet. A silence so absolute that it rang in his ears blanketed the *Nova*. In all that ship there was no sound anywhere.

The *Nova* was falling free, falling back to the surface of Venus!

IV

THE SKIN was stretched taut across Gavin's gaunt features, the freckles standing out like pennies.

The air, rapidly growing denser, began to whine like the keening for the dead. He stiffened, straining to catch the sound he had imagined.

It came again. The cough of a rocket tube.

A wild hope flamed in Gavin's blue eyes. The roar of the jets blasted into life. The cabin heeled sharply to starboard. Gavin slid down the sloping deck until he fetched up against the bulkhead, which had suddenly become the floor.

The *Nova*, he realized in a flood of relief, had come out of the fall and was speeding parallel to the surface. He sat down, his joints turning to water. He had a violent urge to be sick.

Gavin's first belief that the attacking ship had been one of Terra's patrol spacers gave way to doubt. In the first place, the *Nova* hadn't been beyond Venus' thousand-mile-limit. Furthermore, he didn't believe a Terran patrol ship would have waylaid the *Nova* outward bound when she was innocent of her cargo of slaves.

Then who was it?

He heard a bolt click back. The door through which he had entered was directly overhead. The *Nova*, though, had been constructed for flying either keel-on or stern-down. The passages which previous-

ly had been horizontal were now vertical, and the vertical wells running from bow to stern lay horizontal to the angle of flight. A door which had been overhead when they were shooting straight up, now was directly across the cabin.

As Gavin watched, it swung open. Nadia Petrovna was framed in the opening.

She said in a breathless tight voice, "You've got to take over the engine room! Half the black gang are dead or laid up! Captain Cabot sent me to fetch you!"

Her hair, Gavin saw, had come undone and fell about her bare white shoulders like an inky cloud. A trickle of blood drew a crooked red line from a cut above her left eye down across her high cheek bone to her small pointed chin. One of the rose plastic breast plates had been torn completely away, and the rose gown was split up her left hip from sandal to belt.

Gavin plunged for the door.

"This way!" Nadia started aft at a run. "The ladder! The elevators are stalled!"

"Chief engineer?" Gavin grunted. "Where's the chief?"

"Unconscious! Concussion. Don't know how serious," she flung back at him as she dashed along the corridor, her torn skirt streaming out behind her. "The first is dead. The second has a broken leg."

She reached the emergency ladder and threw herself down it with reckless abandon. Gavin followed a little more cautiously.

The engine room, Gavin saw when he and Nadia dropped to the deck, was functioning smoothly enough now, although there was no evidence of the explosion. A smear of blood against a bulkhead caught his eyes, then a twisted body lashed to the deck.

But a jetman, a yellow Venusian girl, naked to the waist, was at her post beside the quartzite windows of the tubes. Sweat poured off her in rivulets as she watched the color of the explosions to check the mixture.

The master mechanic, a fat Terran, was at the bridge televisor. He gave Gavin a relieved glance. "Bridge calling, sir."

Gavin jumped to the televisor. He saw the lean wolfish profile of Captain Cabot on the screen. Cabot's cheek had been

laid open to the bone. One arm swung uselessly. His features were bleak as granite.

Gavin said, "Murdock reporting, sir."

"Take over, Mr. Murdock." Cabot's voice sounded harsh, metallic through the instrument. "We're describing an orbit about Venus at an altitude of seven kilometers."

"Check."

"Is Miss Petrovna there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me speak to her."

The girl approached the televisor.

Captain Cabot ordered her in a terse voice, "Stay with Murdock. If he shows any signs of treachery, shoot him!"

"Yes, sir," said the girl. She plucked the tiny dart gun from the spring clip on her leg where it had been visible through the rent in her skirt.

"You heard my orders, Mr. Murdock," Cabot's cold voice issued from the instrument. "Stand by to fire the starboard tube-bank. We're coming out of the clouds again."

"Check."

In spite of himself Gavin couldn't help but admire the coolness of Josiah Cabot. He turned to Nadia. "What happened?" he demanded.

THE GIRL, her long black eyes serious, had her dart gun leveled at his chest. "I was at the scanner," she replied in an unsteady voice. "We cleared the clouds, making five G's. This ship was right on top of us."

"What ship?"

She shook her head. "She wasn't a patrol spacer. She didn't identify herself. We dodged. Then she cut loose at us with atom shells. The third shot did the damage. I don't know how serious yet, but half the crew are laid up. Captain Cabot cut the jets, which allowed us to fall back into the cloud bank as if we'd been knocked out."

That was quick shrewd thinking, Gavin realized.

The bridge televisor whistled shrilly.

"Bridge calling," came Cabot's voice.

"Engine room."

"Starboard jets. Half blast."

"Check." Gavin pulled the lever on the control board. "Starboard jets!" he yelled

above the sudden roar to the half-naked jetman.

The *Nova* began to nose upward in a slow arc.

"Prime all tubes," came Cabot's crisp voice through the audio. "We'll be above the clouds any moment."

"Check," said Gavin.

A mounting tension gripped them all as the seconds dragged past. Then the televisor whistled again.

"Cut starboard rockets. Half blast ahead." There was another pause and Cabot added with a faint smile, "We're through the cloud bank. No sign of the spacer."

Nadia heaved a sigh of relief and leaned weakly against the ladder.

"Guess we lost her half around the planet," surmised Gavin.

"Course 37.22 x 5," came Cabot's voice once more. "Proceed at one G until we ascertain damage. That is all."

"Check," said Gavin. He snapped off the televisor. "You can put that dart gun away," he advised Nadia dryly.

The girl snapped erect. She whipped the dart gun in line with Gavin's chest again. "I haven't been relieved!" She began in a queer voice. The gun trembled. Her knees sagged. She swayed, sat down suddenly on the first rung of the ladder.

"What's the matter?"

She gave a short, half-hysterical laugh. "Matter! I've had the pants scared off me, and you ask what's the matter!" She clenched her teeth, dropped her head in her hands. Her black hair fell like a veil over her face.

Gavin snapped on the televisor.

"Engine room calling."

"Bridge," came Cabot's precise voice.

"Murdock speaking, sir. Advise Miss Petrovna be relieved. She's suffering from shock."

Cabot looked startled. He hesitated. "Tell Miss Petrovna she's relieved. Carry on, Mr. Murdock."

"Check."

Gavin turned to the girl. "You heard the Captain."

She nodded weakly. There was a large greenish bruise on the gleaming flesh of her shoulder which Gavin hadn't noticed before. He said, "You'd better go to your cabin. Patch yourself up." He raised a

sandy eyebrow. "That costume could stand a repair job, too."

Nadia glanced at herself, at the missing breast plate, the ripped skirt, and wailed, "Oh, dear. It's ruined."

"You're lucky that you're not, too," drawled Gavin dryly.

"Ruined? Me?" She shot him a glance from her long black eyes. "Why Mr. Murdock, I didn't know you were so impetuous," and fled up the ladder.

Gavin stared after her. He made an uncomplimentary but expressive remark under his breath.

THE JETMAN and master mechanic stood their regular four-hour watches, but Gavin went unrelieved. He spent the first twelve hours examining the *Nova's* space drive. He could discover nothing extraordinary about it. It was capable of driving the slave ship at an acceleration of five G's, but several of the latest model Terran patrol spacers were able to do as well. It left him completely mystified.

No great damage had been done the *Nova*, but, besides sundry fractured arms, legs, and ribs, seven men had been killed outright. The chief engineer was recovering from a light case of concussion. Gavin was the only qualified engineer aboard able to stand watch.

He drank gallons of coffee during the next twelve hours, trying desperately to stay awake. He brooded over the fact that with one dead engineer and another laid up with a fractured leg, he and the chief would have to stand four on and four off during the entire twelve sidereal months, which was the minimum time required to make the crossing between Venus and Jupiter.

At the conclusion of thirty-four hours, Gavin was groggy with fatigue. His eyelids felt like sandpaper. He was irritable as a bear. He cursed the jetman and master mechanic whenever they failed to jump fast enough at the rasp of his voice.

His chin dropped against his chest. He snapped his head up, realizing he'd been asleep on his feet, and glanced at the chronometer. He had been on watch for thirty-seven hours.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

Gavin swung around and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. A small wiry man with

his head swathed in bandages had descended the ladder without Gavin's hearing him.

"I'm Villanowski," said the man in a cultured voice. "Chief engineer. Sorry I couldn't relieve you sooner."

Gavin shook hands, feeling an almost uncontrollable urge to throw himself on the deck and sleep. He repeated the course and their acceleration mechanically.

"Go on to your cabin," the chief urged. "Get a good sleep. We'll have to stand four hours on and four off the rest of the voyage, but it'll only be two weeks."

"Two weeks!" Gavin echoed. "But that's impossible, sir." His fatigued brain grasped at the puzzle confusedly and then came up with an answer. "We're turning back to Venus?"

"No." Villanowski shook his head. "We're going on to Jupiter."

"But that's a twelve month voyage."

The chief patted his shoulder. "You haven't heard of the little death," he smiled.

"Little death?"

Villanowski nodded. "Never mind trying to understand now. You're out on your feet, Murdock. I'll explain after you've had some rest. But take my word for it. We'll be setting the *Nova* down on Jupiter in two weeks."

Gavin staggered to his cabin in bewilderment.

He threw himself on his bunk without even bothering to remove his shoes. He thought, *Little death! Jupiter in two weeks! That crack on the skull must have affected the chief engineer's mind!* Then sleep descended on him like a shroud.

V

WHEN GAVIN at length awakened, he rolled out of his bunk groggily, showered and shaved and then made his way to the officer's mess. Nadia Petrovna, dressed in practical coveralls of gray siliconex, was seated at a table eating bacon and eggs.

Bacon and eggs! Gavin stared. Whoever heard of such grub aboard a spacer bound on a year's voyage. And there had been showers, and the cabins were not especially cramped.

Nadia waved a piece of toast at him.

"Hello! The crew've been laying bets on when you'd come out of your coma."

He sat down and rang for the messman.

"How long does this last?" he inquired pointing at the fresh food. "When do we start on concentrates?"

"We don't."

"Don't use concentrates! But the bulk! And the water. Isn't it rationed?"

Nadia laughed infectiously. Just then the messman, a huge negro, appeared and took Gavin's order.

The girl said, "We carry only a little over two weeks' supplies."

Gavin recalled the chief engineer's prediction that the *Nova* would be at Jupiter in two weeks. He glanced at the chart on the forward bulkhead. The *Nova's* position was marked with a pin. The slaver, he saw, had been traveling at a good clip, but nothing phenomenal.

"We'll have to go faster than that," he said dryly.

Nadia's long black eyes sparkled. "You don't know about the little death yet?"

"The little death? Yes, the chief mentioned it. Just what is this little death?"

Nadia opened her mouth to speak, but closed it. She was peering beyond him, Gavin realized, a frightened expression on her pretty slavic features. Gavin swung around.

Captain Josiah Cabot stood in the door way, swaying slightly.

HIS EYES were glazed. Fine cruel wrinkles crossed his lean face. He moved stiffly into the messroom, his eyes straight ahead, and sat down at a table like a mechanical doll. He didn't even see them, Gavin realized with a start.

The black man came out of the pantry with a bottle of Terran whiskey and a glass, and set them before the Captain. The negro's eyes rolled, showing the whites. He got back into his pantry as quick as possible.

Nadia leaned across the table to Gavin. "He's drunk. He'll stay drunk until after the little death. It's horrible!"

Suddenly the Captain burst into a roar of laughter. He poured himself a drink and gulped it greedily. He said in an unexpectedly ringing voice:

"I see you, Paula. Why don't you go back to hell where you belong? You can't touch me now," and burst into laughter again, staring at the empty doorway.

A cold chill shivered up Gavin's spine.

Nadia said, "Paula was his mistress. She tried to poison him. He strangled her and threw her body out the disposal chute!"

"Hey," hissed Gavin, "keep your voice down! He can hear you."

"He doesn't even know we're here."

Gavin looked at Nadia thoughtfully. The girl's white features had gone translucent like milk glass. Her long black eyes wore an expression of horror.

She said, "It's just starting. He sees all the ones he's killed. They return and plague him. He can't rid his mind of them. It's a psychological quirk . . ." She paused unsteadily.

"Go on," Gavin urged.

"You'll see." Her voice was faint.

"You were a handsome tart, Paula," said Cabot, his glazed eyes following some figure invisible to Gavin. "A foul mind in a beautiful body. How many times did you deceive me? But I wasn't fooled." He laughed disagreeably. "I wasn't fooled. How did it feel to wake up with my fingers about your throat?" He paused, lean head cocked to one side, the cruel lines etched deeper about his mouth. "That fine body doesn't do you much good in hell, Paula?" The gloating slowly died from his features, his voice became resigned. "There's no use holding a grudge. You're dead, Paula, and there's nothing you can do about it. It's too bad you can't drink. You were fond enough of it alive. But I'll drink it for you," and he chuckled triumphantly.

"I'm leaving." Nadia sprang to her feet, lips bloodless. "I can't stand it."

Gavin escorted her to the door. He paused to salute Cabot. "Charmed to make your acquaintance, Paula," he added.

Nadia glanced at him in surprise. "How can you make fun of him?"

Gavin regarded the girl somberly. "I'm not making fun of him." His voice was grim. "This girl he murdered — Paula — she might be a person to cultivate."

"My star, you're cold. You're not even human!" Nadia started off, but Gavin laid hold of her arm.

"What happened to Trev, that Martian who sold out to X?"

Nadia faced him again, biting her lip. "Cabot killed him," she replied in a whisper. "His body has been thrown out the disposal chute."

"Who is this mysterious Mr. X?"

"I don't know! I don't know, I tell you!" She wrenched away, fled down the passage.

Gavin watched her until she was out of sight. Nadia had accompanied Cabot that day in Trev's office. The record on Captain Cabot in the T.I.S. file was brief but illuminating. *Antecedents unknown. Master of the slave ship, Nova, Venusian registry. Suspected in connection with disappearance of two women: Paula du-Bois, a Terran of French descent; Astra, a Martian girl of the house of Cor.*

Gavin whistled softly. It wasn't hard to imagine others. A modern bluebeard. Only Cabot didn't hang them in a closet; he threw them out a disposal chute.

VILLANOWSKI'S face was gray with fatigue when Gavin finally relieved him. The chief was a slight homely man with the quick darting movements of an old maid. His hair was iron gray, untrimmed, rumpled.

He said wearily to Gavin, "We're going on regular watches after all. The second has her leg in a cast. We've rigged a special chair for her."

Gavin nodded. "What's the little death, Mr. Villanowski? I've been hearing more about it, but no one seems inclined to explain."

The chief engineer passed his hand before his blood-shot eyes. "That requires considerable explanation, Mr. Murdock. I'm too tired to attempt it at the moment. Later." He gave Gavin the course and acceleration, adding that Miss Wilde, the second assistant-engineer, would relieve him and disappeared up the ladder.

With the one exception of Nadia Petrovna, the dossier of every man and woman aboard the *Nova* in the T.I.S. secret file was complete. Gavin almost knew them by heart. John Villanowski was a Terran of Polish descent. A scientist of interplanetary fame, he had held the chair of astro-physics at New Yale for a while. He had been instrumental in

the development of the meteor deflector, the robot astrogator, and a radical improvement of the scanner.

General Atomic, though, had stolen all three of his discoveries. Villanowski had sued. False evidence had been trumped against him; his reputation had been blackened. Then General Atomic had used its influence to force him to resign from the university.

The injustice of his disgrace had wrought a shocking change in Villanowski. From a pleasant savant he became an anti-social, a dangerous man. He had fled to Venus where he had dropped from sight for a while, turning up again as chief engineer of the slaver, *Nova*.

Any startling development of the *Nova's* space drive, Gavin reasoned, would be due to Villanowski.

The televisior buzzed. Gavin snapped it on. "Engine room."

Nadia's features glowed on the screen. "Bridge calling." She flashed him a smile. "I'll be on the observation deck when I've finished my trick on the bridge, Mr. Murdock." The instrument went dead.

Gavin muttered something under his breath. He caught Jerome Fitz, the master mechanic, eyeing him with a grin and cursed the fat Terran roundly.

"Come here, Fitz."

"Yes sir." The master mechanic left his work and approached.

"What the hell is this little death?"

Fitz scratched his head. "I've been through it twenty-seven times," he confessed, "and I don't rightly know, sir."

"Don't know? What kind of answer is that? What do you do here in the engine room?"

Again the fat Terran shook his head. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but we're not in the engine room, then."

"What?"

"No, sir. We go to our fo'c'sles. Everybody. Crew and officers. The *Nova* switches onto the robot pilot . . ." He hesitated.

"And then?" urged Gavin, impatiently. "What happens then? Speak up, man."

Fitz looked embarrassed. "I'd rather not talk about it, sir."

"Nonsense."

The Venusian girl, who was serving as jetman had approached and was listening.

"It's hard to explain," she interrupted, her green eyes thoughtful. "I think we die, sir."

"What?"

"Yes, sir. I know it sounds ridiculous. You'll have to go through it first before you understand. It's not nice to think about. It's even less fun when it happens. The third, who was here before you, sir—he—he reformed."

"Reformed?"

"Yes, sir. He said he couldn't stand himself after the little death. He's running a mission in Venusport now."

Gavin cracked his knuckles thoughtfully. His gaunt freckled face was sober. He didn't question the pair further, but set to examining the machinery with minute care.

He found nothing until he reached the aft bulkhead. Then his pale blue eyes fell on a faint rectangular line in the rigid steel. A door. But there were neither knobs nor bolts nor any visible means of opening it.

"Look here, Fitz," he called the master mechanic to his side, pointed out the door. "Where does this lead?"

Fitz scratched his head. "I don't know. Never noticed it before."

The Venusian girl had seen it, but had no more idea than Fitz what lay beyond.

GAVIN spent most of his four-hour watch trying to ascertain the secret of its mechanism. He was still sweating over it profusely when Sally Wilde, the second assistant engineer, arrived in her wheel chair to relieve him.

The second was a tall, gray-eyed blonde, handsome after a rangy fashion. One of her long legs was propped straight ahead of her in a plastic cast. She was wheeled down by the relieving watch and shook hands with Gavin like a man.

"I've been curious about what you were like," she informed him with a roguish smile. She wore a green wrapper thrown about her indifferently, and that was all. She caught the direction of his eye. "Damned nuisance to dress with this lump of plastic on my leg."

She was, Gavin perceived, the arch type of emancipated female whom he detested so heartily. He mumbled something about being glad she was doing so nicely.

"The last third," she explained, "was a disappointment. But you're a pleasant surprise, Mr. Murdock. So virile." She thumped the transparent plastic cast. "When I get rid of this we'll do something about it."

Gavin fled up the ladder.

He came out on the observation deck and recognized Nadia in her gray coveralls seated in a deck chair and staring upward at the stars. They floated in the void like gems on black velvet.

He came up behind her saying, "Some day man will conquer outer space as he has the planetary system."

Nadia sat up, her black eyes provoked. "What are you? A fish? After all I'm supposed to have a passion for you. Didn't I say back in Trev's office that we had a lot to talk over, Mr. Gavin Murdock, ex-chief engineer of the *Europa*?"

Gavin pulled up a deck chair. His blue eyes wary, he asked in a flat voice, "Why did you vouch for me? You never worked for Transplanet. Why did you lie?"

"No," she replied slowly. "No, I never was third mate aboard any of Transplanet's ships. But I wasn't lying. I did know you." She laughed teasingly. "And I did have a crush on you, Mr. Gavin Murdock, ex-first assistant-engineer of Tri-World's ship, the *Saturn*!"

Gavin controlled an inclination to jump. His face hardened. It was true he had been first assistant-engineer of the *Saturn*. He had left her to join the T.I.S.

"I was a cadet aboard the *Saturn*," Nadia explained. "Now just exactly what are you? And what do you want aboard the *Nova*?"

Gavin was silent a moment. "Now you're going to lie," accused the girl angrily.

"No. On the contrary, I'm going to ask you the same question. Your own position can't be too secure. That's why you had to back me up with that artistic lie in Trev's office. You were afraid they'd start asking you questions . . . I wouldn't be surprised if you were a T.I.S. agent!"

The girl looked startled. A flush suffused her pale cheeks. She said, "So that's how you plan to shut my mouth. You devil! You know that if Cabot even suspected such a thing he'd kill me."

"Well," said Gavin coolly. "I don't

know that any of us can afford to take a chance if you're a T.I.S. agent."

"Hush!" pleaded Nadia in agony.

"Look what it would mean. We'd be condemned to the Lunar Corrective Colony."

She gripped his arm desperately. "But I'm not! I'm not!" She regained her composure with an effort and went on in a low bitter tone, "I have been proscribed! Does that answer your questions? I killed a man. He was a high official of Tri-World. The corporation put a price on my head."

The Terran government was humanitarian. Capital punishment had been abolished along with a score of other institutions such as marriage, divorce and the family.

But the big corporations were the real rulers. Feudal in character, they maintained their power by purges that would have made the bloody twentieth century snow white by comparison. Their property, their officials were inviolate. Their law was a tooth for a tooth, and their gunmen hung on the trail of an offender whom they had proscribed until they caught up with him.

If the girl was telling the truth, she was as good as dead. Sooner or later, ten—twenty years, it made no difference, the agents of Tri-World would catch up with her.

"Why did you kill him?"

"He—he . . ." She glanced at the deck, flushed faintly.

"Nonsense," said Gavin. "People don't get killed for that any more. Why did you kill him?"

She looked at him, startled. "He caught me drawing a plan of Tri-World's magnetic ore-loader. It was a corporation secret. I was just a kid, a cadet aboard the *Saturn*. I—I was offered a lot of money for the plans . . ." She halted lamely.

"Who offered you the money?"

"Trev." Her voice was a whisper.

GAVIN was surprised only at the fact that Nadia had confessed such a thing. She had placed herself completely in his power as long as she lived.

"I didn't ask you here to tell you that," she broke in on his speculations. Her voice was unsteady. "But to show you some-

thing. Look." And she pointed behind them towards Venus.

Gavin at first could see nothing except the yellow sun with its spectacular corona. Then he discovered a faint streak like the luminous trail of a meteor. After a second he made out a second and a third.

"We're being followed," Nadia said. "They've been on our trail ever since we left Venus. The chief astrogator figured their speed. They'll overtake us in five sidereal days. Only, they'll be too late."

"Why?"

"The little death!" she explained.

A premonition of danger made a cold track in his brain. He swung around.

Nadia Petrovna stood very straight not four feet from him. Big tears stood like drops of crystal in her long black eyes. She was holding her tiny dart gun at Gavin's chest.

"May God rest your soul." She uttered the words in a choked voice, and pulled the trigger.

Gavin was caught completely flatfooted. He glimpsed a flash as the splinter of steel zipped at his chest and knew he was a dead man.

The dart struck his breast and stood straight out from his blouse. He stared down at it in panic.

But no fire of poison coursed through his veins.

He remembered his dart-proof plastic vest with a flood of relief. Another needle stuck through his blouse into the vest as Nadia pulled the trigger a second time.

Gavin crumpled slowly forward.

Then his knees stiffened. His hand snapped out to close about Nadia's slim wrist, dragging her down with him. Savagely, he wrenched the gun from her fingers. She began to sob.

Sitting on the deck, he plucked the two poisoned darts from the front of his plastic vest. "It's good to know who your friends are," he said dryly and got to his feet. "Don't try it again. I won't be so lenient next time."

VI

BY THE SIXTH DAY, Gavin Murdock was no nearer the solution of the little death than he had been at the start.

It was Villanowski's watch below. Gavin sat on the observation deck, watching the three streaks in the void which betrayed their pursuers. They had closed the gap until they were almost on top of them. If the *Nova* possessed a unique spacedrive, Gavin reflected, she'd better be unlimbering it. The three ships were almost in atomic shell range.

His thoughts wrestled for the hundredth time when the little death. Villanowski had become suspicious and clammed up. The officers frankly didn't like to discuss it. They evaded his questions, insisting he must first experience it.

Suddenly, Gavin started to his feet, his eyes searching the void. In toward the sun he had glimpsed the hair line of a rocket ship's jets. He thought he could distinguish five separate streaks of light, but they were so faint and far away that they blended into one streak. Five trails! That could only mean a flight of patrol spacers blasting after the three pursuers of the *Nova*.

Gavin heard a step behind him and twisted sideways, his hand rising to his shoulder holster.

Nadia Petrovna came out on the observation deck. She caught sight of Gavin and started to withdraw. Then an expression of determination took possession of her features. She flushed and said, "Let's call off the war."

"Sure." Gavin's voice was without mockery, but his hand still hovered close to his chest.

The girl came across the dack, her expression flooded with relief. "I'm glad now I didn't kill you. I—I was frightened. You believe that?"

"Sure."

"I've never dared tell anybody what I was forced to tell you. I've lived for two years in absolute terror. I was desperate."

"Sure."

"You don't believe me?"

"Not altogether," he admitted. His hand didn't leave his chest. "Why should I?"

Nadia bit her lip. Then she slipped her hand in the breast of her coveralls, brought out her diminutive dart gun. She brought it out very slow and holding it by the barrel because Gavin was covering her with his own automatic.

"Drop it," he commanded. "Push it to me with your foot."

"Now," she said, "can we talk without suspicion? I'm unarmed."

"Are you?"

Her black eyes widened in surprise.

"Yes. Of course. I wouldn't . . ."

"Wouldn't you?" asked Gavin stonily. She sighed faintly. "You can search me."

Gavin moved around behind her. He searched her impersonally, but thoroughly. If she'd been concaling so much as a postage stamp he was convinced he would have found it.

"All right," he said with a grin. "Now I trust you."

She dropped to a deck chair. "I've been trying to work up enough courage," she confessed, "to—to talk to you. But you've been so grim you've frightened me off."

"Why? D'you want another try at me?"

"That's not fair." Her eyes sought the deck. "I'm afraid. Cabot has been . . . he's . . . I think he suspects me of working with X."

"Are you?"

"No." Her voice was shocked.

"But Trev was?"

She nodded.

"And you were working with Trev?"

"I wasn't working with him," she protested. "Only that one time. He offered me five thousand credits to copy the *Saturn's* loader."

"How did you connect with the *Nova*?"

"Do you mean how did I happen to get the job as third mate? But I told you. I was a cadet aboard the *Saturn*. I simply asked Cabot for the job."

Gavin said, "That lie wouldn't fool a school kid. If you were proscribed by Tri-World you wouldn't have dared approach Cabot in the open. Someone hid you out. Someone with enough influence with Cabot got you aboard the *Nova*—"

The general alarm cut loose with its strident clangor. Gavin sprang to his feet. "What's that for?"

"The little death!" Nadia said with a shudder.

AS SUDDENLY as the bell started it was stilled. A harsh voice came through the public address system, "Go to your quarters immediately! All personnel

report immediately to your quarters and take to your bunks." The voice brayed forth the commands three more times at short intervals.

Gavin started at a run for the interior of the ship.

"Wait! Wait for me," Nadia cried.

He paused. "You better run for your cabin."

"I'm scared," she confessed in a trembling voice. "Let me come with you."

"I'm going to the engine room."

"But . . ." Her black eyes opened wide. Then she said defiantly, "I don't care. I—I want to come, too."

The jets fell silent.

"There she goes over to the robot pilot. If you're coming with me you'll have to stretch a leg." Without another word, he plunged off down the corridor.

A peculiar whine began to make itself heard. It was so high it hurt his ears. The atmosphere within the ship was growing foggy. A yellow-tinged mist eddied sluggishly like ink discoloring a glass of water.

He reached the engine room. There he halted so abruptly that Nadia pitched against him.

The engine room was deserted. But the strange door in the aft bulkhead stood open.

"What is it?" Nadia whispered.

"Don't know." He blinked his eyes, trying to pierce the gathering yellow fog. He caught a glimpse of a bank of switches, the base of a spherical tube, big as man. Then Villanowski passed across the opening from left to right.

Gavin began to creep toward the door. Halfway there a blinding flash stabbed at the base of his skull. He swayed dizzily, thought, "Nadia!" Half drawing his dart-gun, he turned laboriously around.

But the girl lay stretched on the deck, her long black lashes fluttering.

Gavin paused, tried to turn back to the door. It was like moving through syrup. A second flash burst in his brain. He pitched to the deck.

* * * * *

"Nine years!" said a man's stifled voice. It reached Gavin, vaguely distorted like an image through wavy glass. "My orbit, it's been nine years!"

Through the open window came a wail-

ing chant of imported black laborers from Terra.

"But I didn't do it. You can't take me back now." The man's face was sweating and yellow-white. His fingers twitched. He spread them nervously on the desk top. "I'm proscribed. Jordon was a stockholder in Amalgamated Plastic. They'll kill me! Even in the Lunar Corrective Colony, they'll kill me."

"Sorry."

The cold unfeeling tone of his own voice shocked Gavin.

"But it's been nine years," the man persisted as if the time meant anything. Gavin had been sent out by the T.I.S. to get him. Twenty years wouldn't have made any difference.

"Even if I was guilty, I've proved I don't need corrective psychiatry. I'm not an incorrigible."

"Look," Gavin interrupted. "I've got a job. I don't know whether you're guilty or not and I don't care. I don't even blame you for killing Jordon, if you did . . ."

Gavin's sense of strangeness increased. This had all happened once before during his first year in the T.I.S. This man had been accused of murdering a minor official of Amalgamated Plastic and had fled. After nine years the T.I.S. had learned that he was at a remote trading post on Ganymede. Gavin had been sent to fetch him back for trial.

Only Gavin wasn't dreaming all this now. He was *re-living* it!

He was inside himself, yet outside, judging, appraising his own actions with the detachment of an impersonal observer.

"I can make you rich. Millions of credits." The man's voice became low, wheedling. "There's a deposit of pitchblende back in the hills. It's fabulous . . ."

"It's no use," said Gavin harshly. "Hell, man, I'd always know that six or seven years from now another T.I.S. agent might tap me on the shoulder like I've done you. Besides, I'm satisfied. I'm a . . ."

"Manhunter!"

"If you like, I'm a manhunter. You might as well ask a cat to turn loose a mouse. It's against his nature. Come along now."

"Murderer," said the man with discon-

certing calmness. "I'm innocent—and you're killing me just as surely as if you shot me with that dart gun. Do you think Amalgamated Plastic has forgotten? I'm proscribed. Their agents will get me. Why don't you shoot me outright?" His voice ran up the scale, half-hysterical with fright as he read his sentence in Gavin's cold, unblinking eyes. "You're not human. Go ahead. Kill me now. I'm not coming. Do you hear? I'm not coming."

Gavin saw himself reach suddenly across the desk and rap the fugitive on the skull with the butt of his dart gun.

From its peculiar vantage point, the detached half of Gavin's personality knew the inexorable sequence of events to follow. He would haul the fellow back to Terra, where he would be murdered by agents of Amalgamated Plastic at his trial.

For the first time, Gavin realized, he was seeing himself as he must appear to others. A gaunt, hollow-cheeked, sandy-haired man, with implacable blue eyes, tight-lipped, hard-faced. Manhunter!

* * * * *

He felt the cold deck under his fingers. He opened his eyes. He was still in the *Nova's* engine room. The yellow mist had dissipated. He saw Villanowski standing over him. The chief's homely features were cold.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Gavin pulled himself together with an effort and scrambled to his feet.

"Curious," he admitted frankly. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Nadia sit up, holding her temples.

Villanowski's eyes narrowed. "What did you see?"

"Nothing," Gavin said in a disappointed voice. He could feel the perspiration break through his pores. Villanowski was no fool. "The mist caught us at the foot of the ladder." He paused. "Next time we go into the little death, I'd like to be in the control room with you."

"You saw the control room?"

"Oh, the door was open." Gavin summoned all his histrionic ability to sound convincing. "I saw you and started in. Then—then I fainted, I guess."

Indecision was reflected on Villanowski's face. Finally he growled, "Get out, the pair of you. Don't come down here again except on your watch."

GAVIN followed the girl up the ladder, his palms slippery with sweat on the cold bars. He wasn't sure whether he'd fooled Villanowski or not. They entered the mess room, helped themselves to coffee. He realized the girl hadn't uttered a word since the little death. He saw she was regarding him with a half-frightened, half-perplexed frown.

"How did the little death affect you?" he asked her.

"I had a dream. At least, I think it was." She bit her lip.

"What was it about?"

"Something in the future." She laughed. "It's silly, isn't it, to be so frightened at a dream. Especially one so fantastic."

"I don't know," Gavin replied dryly. "Mine didn't leave me so comfortable... but you haven't told me what yours was."

Nadia rubbed her temples. "I dreamed we were all captured on Jupiter and sent to the Penal Colony." She laughed at herself. "It's so silly, because you—you"—again she gave a low laugh—"you were a T.I.S. agent!"

Gavin felt his mouth go dry. He stared at her in consternation. He moistened his lips and started to ask for more particulars, when the chief astrogator entered the messroom.

The *Nova's* astrogator nodded perfunctorily at them and went across to the solar chart. Very deliberately, he pulled out the pin marking the *Nova's* position, moved it across the map to within a week's voyage of Jupiter.

Gavin couldn't believe his eyes. "That's impossible! We weren't unconscious but a few seconds during the little death..."

"An hour," Nadia corrected. "The effects last an hour. So Villanowski claims."

"An hour, then. What difference does it make? The *Nova* couldn't have gone that distance in an hour, nor in a thousand hours! Why man, that's faster than the speed of light!"

The chief astrogator grunted. "Impossible or not, that's our position. If you don't think so, go on out on the observation deck and take a look."

Gavin leaped to his feet and plunged through the door. When he came out on the quartzite enclosed deck, he flung his gaze aloft.

The entire aspect of the heavens had changed. The three streaks denoting the pursuing space craft were absent. The sun had diminished to the size of a lemon. And dead ahead loomed the huge banded disc of Jupiter.

It was true. In the space of a few moments the *Nova* had traversed the void between Venus and Jupiter. Even though the planets were in a superior conjunction, the feat was unthinkable.

No wonder the big corporations were fighting like wildcats to get hold of the *Nova's* spacedrive!

Gavin dropped weakly in a deck chair, overawed by the possibilities. A new era of space travel was being inaugurated!

VII

GAVIN MURDOCK was on watch below, when the *Nova* sliced into the upper strata of Jupiter's atmosphere. She dived in at a slant on the opposite side of the planet for Jovopolis and was quickly smothered from view by the thick translucent air.

To the early astronomers, Jupiter had appeared enormous although it was only about a third denser than water. But the Huygen expedition in the first years of interplanetary travel had resolved the enigma. Jupiter consisted of a small solid core surrounded by an intensive and very dense atmosphere. The force of gravity at the surface was only between two and three times that on Terra.

Nominally, Jupiter was a colony of the Terran empire. But every attempt at settlement had proved disastrous. Today Jovopolis was an outpost, consisting of rotting shacks, a trading post, and one modern structure which housed the Huygen Memorial Institute of Science. Even the interplanetary patrol had made no attempt to install a permanent base. The officers and men lived in their ship while they were assigned to the station.

The *Nova* began to settle Jove-ward. Gavin never left the bridge televisor, pulling switches, relaying orders to the jetman and master mechanic as the clumsy monster performed the ticklish job of landing.

Villanowski, who had been routed out of his bunk by the landing alarm, paced

back and forth the length of the engine room, his eyes everywhere. He didn't interfere, though.

Then the *Nova* struck with a bump which threw the chief engineer to his hands and knees.

He scrambled up, brushing off his shorts. "Nice landing." He patted Gavin's shoulder. "Nice landing."

It was a nice landing. Gavin's bony freckled features relaxed. Broken ankles, bruises and sprains were only too frequent when setting a ship down without the benefit of spacedrives.

"How long will it take us to load?"

"Five days," Villanowski replied. "Jovian time."

The Jovian day, Gavin knew, was only nine hours and fifty-five minutes long. That meant the *Nova* would be on Jupiter forty-nine hours. Gavin made a hasty mental calculation. It cut the margin of success to the barest minimum time. He would have to act and act quickly.

He started for the ladder, feeling the increased gravity tug at his flesh.

"Not so fast, lad," said Villanowski. Gavin paused.

The chief engineer's attitude had undergone such a remarkable change that Gavin's own suspicions had been aroused. It dated from the second meal following the little death. Nadia had regaled the officers with her dream—the one in which Gavin had been a T.I.S. agent and contrived the capture of them all on Jupiter.

Villanowski's homely face had clouded. Then he had remarked with a wry expression that stranger things could happen.

Oddly enough, however, he no longer evinced the slightest suspicion of Gavin. But an occasional joshing reference to Murdock, the T.I.S. agent, revealed that he hadn't forgotten Nadia's dream.

Gavin said, "Yes sir," in a doubtful tone. He couldn't afford to arouse any doubts now.

"The Captain wants to see you before you go ashore."

"Yes, sir."

Wondering what Cabot wanted with him, he struggled up the ladder. Sweat began to pour from his skin. It was like climbing with the old man of the sea anchored to his back.

By the time he reached his cabin he was exhausted. He stretched out on his bunk, drew his breath in sobbing gasps. No wonder colonization of Jupiter had proved so difficult.

At length, he drove himself to his feet. The plan, which had been hatched in the head office of the T.I.S., would brook no delay. Captain Cabot would have to wait.

Stooping, he pulled a bundle of tough, specially-treated fiberoid, a material used in the construction of space suits, from under his bunk, slung it across his shoulder. Next, he dragged forth a clock-like instrument to which had been attached a magnesium flare, and lastly a cylinder of hydrogen.

The hydrogen Gavin had refined from water by a crude electrolysis. The rest of the equipment he had slipped from the engine room, working on it during leisure moments since the little death.

He opened his door. The corridor was deserted.

Twice during the ascent topside, Gavin had to stop and rest. Even breathing was an effort. At length he reached the arched outer skin of the monster, pried open an escape hatch.

THE thick yellow air of Jupiter poured down upon him like soup. It smelled and tasted faintly like swamp gas. He had a momentary fear that he would strangle. A spasm of coughing seized him as he gulped in the first breaths.

Then, his lungs having adjusted themselves, he clambered to the outer shell.

A hundred feet below, he could make out the surface, only sketchily visible through the yellow pea-soup air. Slave pens and cantonments were all swallowed by the dense fog.

He set to work assembling his instruments. The cold knifed to his bones. A wind was blowing, too. It pushed against him like the sluggish current of a river.

The fiberoid package, unfolded, proved to be a balloon almost ten feet in diameter. It had a safety valve in it to neutralize the pressure when the bag reached the stratosphere. Gavin attached the clock and flare, started the clock in operation, inflated the bag. The instant it tugged at his numbed fingers, he shut off the hydrogen, cast it free.

It was scarcely a fifth inflated, but the heavy pressure caused it to float slowly, upward out of sight.

The clock was timed to ignite the flare when the balloon reached the stratosphere. Observatories on Io, Europa, Callisto, and Ganymede had their instruments trained on Jupiter. As soon as the flare was discovered, a check was to be made of the prevailing winds in that area. A simple parabola would indicate the balloon flare's probable course. The information then would be relayed to a flight of five patrol spacers held in readiness on the nearer moon.

That was the way it had been planned. But now Gavin was not so sure. So many things could interfere. He closed the trap overhead and retreated back to his cabin.

Sweating profusely, he flung himself on his bunk. He was still there, his breath rasping in his throat, when his door was pushed silently open from the outside.

Gavin whipped his dart gun from its spring clip and slipped it under his pillow. He didn't move, but lay still with his eyes closed except for the barest fraction of an inch.

The door yawned wider.

Then the figure of Nadia Petrovna slipped soundlessly inside, eased the door shut. She stood over him, watching him with a desperate intentness. Satisfied that he slept, she set to work searching his cabin.

Gavin lay quiet, observing her skill appreciatively. The girl was efficient. She went rapidly through his closet, his chest, his bags.

She probed the lone chair cushion with a long needle, peered under his bed, then vanished in the shower. After a moment she reappeared, stood over him again, a puzzled expression on her pretty slavic features.

"No luck, eh?" murmured Gavin pleasantly. He opened his eyes and sat up.

Nadia gasped.

Gavin narrowed his eyes and roared in a suddenly harsh voice, "What the hell are you prying through my luggage for?"

The girl jumped. "I—I . . ." she began, and then lapsed into confusion.

He waited.

"It sounds so foolish," she confessed, her long black eyes on the deck. Her

fingers were twining about each other nervously. "But I can't get that dream out of my mind." She glanced up at him with a frightened expression.

"What dream?"

"The little death. When you turned out to be a T.I.S. agent. I—I begged you to give me a chance, let me try to escape."

"Yes," asked Gavin with a show of interest. "What did I do?"

"You laughed at me. I can't forget it."

"I wouldn't laugh at you," he replied somberly.

The girl's eyes softened. They were remarkable eyes, long and black and lustrous, the lashes half-hiding them.

"Why, Gavin, I believe you're flirting with me."

There was an odd little laugh in the words. It was the first time she'd called him Gavin.

"Don't be too sure," said Gavin gruffly. His arms went around her waist. He pulled her to a seat beside him and kissed her roughly.

Someone rapped at the door. Nadia sprang to her feet. Gavin called out, "Who is it?"

"The steward, sir. The Captain sent me to fetch you to the messroom."

WHEN Gavin entered the officer's mess, he saw the Captain seated across a table from the thinnest man he had ever encountered.

"This is Hendricks," Cabot introduced them. The Captain was cold sober and hard-eyed. "He's the factor here at the cantonment."

Gavin shook hands. The factor had an amazing grip. His flesh hung on in tough strings. He looked more like an animated skeleton than a man, but Gavin was conscious of a tremendous wiry strength in him.

"You going ashore, Mr. Murdock?" the factor inquired.

Gavin nodded. "Miss Petrovna and I were planning to visit the cantonment." He saw a glance pass between Cabot and the factor.

The factor said, "Splendid," and rubbed his emaciated hands together. "Allow me to play host. The officers are already at my establishment."

Gavin thanked him.

"But let me warn you," went on the factor. "Don't wander off. The gravity aboard the ship here is bad enough. The atmosphere is much worse. It's easy to get lost, I've known newcomers to die of exhaustion only a few steps from the cantonment."

Gavin thanked him again, started to withdraw when the factor halted him.

"I've bearers waiting outside," he explained. "They're at your service while you're here. I really advise you not to walk any more than necessary."

This time Gavin made good his escape. He had been politely instructed not to pry, he realized. Villanowski might be confident of him, but not the Captain.

Gavin was smiling when he met Nadia at the main port, but his eyes were hard. Both of them had donned outer insulating garments of thermal cloth.

"We're going to be carried in litters like ancient Oriental potentates," he informed her.

Nadia laughed. "You've never been to Jupiter before?"

He shook his head.

They passed through the lock into the swirling yellow air. It was like swimming. They crept down the gangplank. The bearers who were standing patiently at the surface.

Gavin had seen Jovian dawn men before, but they never failed to excite his curiosity. Huge, almost seven feet tall, and muscled like gladiators, they were imposing as Greek gods. Their skin was the vivid blue of polished turquoise, their long manes as yellow as a sunburst.

"There's a double litter," Nadia pointed out. "Let's take that."

Gavin followed her inside. The litter was cushioned like a divan. One was borne alone in a semi reclining position. Nadia clapped her hands and cried, "Cantonment!"

Four naked blue giants swung the litter to their shoulders and started off at a rapid trot. In a few paces, the ship had disappeared. They were like a tiny raft, alone in a welter of yellow oppressive fog.

Gavin, peering over the edge, saw that the giants were following a paved road. After a moment they began to pass an endless procession of dawn men, chained



ankle to ankle and moving sluggishly toward the *Nova*.

Already the loading had started.

Gavin stared at the half-men curiously. They crept along, features drawn, their yellow manes matted with dirt. There

was a haunted look in their eyes like caged animals.

Thirty percent would die in the crossing, he knew. Within a year ninety percent of the rest would be dead, victims of home-sickness, of pneumonia and

measles and Venusian lung rot, not to mention a score of other diseases. The terrible rate of fatality was good business for the slavers. It held up the demand.

"They aren't really human," said Nadia in a faint voice as if reading his thoughts. "They're sub-men."

Gavin nodded. Some place along the evolutionary scale the Jovians had taken a wrong turning. They would never evolve into true *homo sapiens*. But even cattle weren't treated as they were.

The walls of the cantonment hove suddenly in view through the murky atmosphere. The giants paused before a massive entrance like the gate of a feudal castle.

Gavin climbed out of the litter and started to help Nadia down. Somewhere off in the distance he heard a faint popping.

"What is it?" cried the girl, struck by his strained air of attention.

"It sounds like the dum-dum fire. Listen!"

They both fell silent.

FROM the direction of the *Nova* came faintly a sound like a string of fire-crackers going off together. "It is dum-dum fire!"

"But it can't be! It's impossible."

The sound of explosions drifted to them again.

Gavin sprang back into the litter.

"Wait here," he cried. "Something's wrong at the ship." He knew that it couldn't be the Terran patrol spacers attacking. The balloon hadn't time to rise into the stratosphere yet.

A great fear for the *Nova's* safety gripped him. Whatever the cost, the ship must be preserved intact so that Terra's scientists could examine her space drive. It had become the paramount issue, overshadowing in importance even the detestable slave trade.

"No!" Nadia cried. "Don't go back there." She flung herself on him, pressing her body flat against his. "Please, for my sake, Gavin!"

He pushed her rudely aside.

Just then the chief astrogator burst upon them, running from inside the cantonment. His strides were labored, his breath wheezing in his chest. He saw

Gavin and shouted: "The ship's being attacked! They've radioed the cantonment for help!"

"Who by?"

"X's men!" The chief astrogator began to run down the paved highway toward the *Nova* and was swallowed by the fog.

Gavin heard something whine through the air. He flung himself flat on his face, shouting at Nadia, "Down! They're shelling the cantonment!"

The shell burst out of sight in the fog. A blast of air hit him like a wall of water.

Nadia sat up, her face smudged where she'd groveled in the dirt. She was cursing like a spaceman.

Gavin yanked her to her feet. "Clear out!" He began to haul her away from the doomed cantonment.

Another shell lobbed over their heads to explode directly behind them. Gavin's hands were torn from the girl. He was blown a dozen feet by the blast.

He lay where he lit, knowing nothing, feeling nothing.

VIII

GAVIN'S first impression was one of numbing cold. He opened his eyes. Pitch blackness engulfed him. He had difficulty orienting himself. Rather hazily, he recalled the shelling of the cantonment by X's men.

Gradually his mind cleared.

The swift Jovian night had fallen, he perceived, and the temperature had dropped sharply. Only his insulating outer garments had saved him from freezing.

He began to grope around for Nadia's body. He found nothing but bare ground, stones, shrubs.

He sat back on his haunches, getting his bearings. The night pressed against his eyeballs; silence rang in his ears. No popping of dum-dum fire was to be heard. Whether the raiders had won, or Cabot was still in possession of his ship, he couldn't tell. But the fight was over.

X, himself, he realized, couldn't possibly have reached Jupiter yet. Even if he had been aboard one of the ships which had pursued the *Nova* out from Venus, a whole year must elapse before he could arrive. Then, if X's men had attacked the *Nova*, they had been planted

here earlier and had been waiting in ambush.

That meant X had been tipped off to the location of the hidden slave cantonment on Jupiter.

Something brushed against Gavin's face! It felt like cold fingertips.

Gavin's arms flailed the air in stark terror. He struck a soft, cold, hairless body. There was a barrage of half human squeaks. The air was full of the fluttering of wings.

Scavenger bats!

Gavin felt a prickling of cold sweat break through his skin. He began to grope feverishly for the girl's body again, working outward in an ever-widening spiral.

After an hour he had lengthened the radius of his search until he was among the debris of the cantonment. He sat back on his haunches, sure of only one thing. Nadia Petrovna was not there!

The air above the demolished cantonment was thick with the squeaks and wing rushing of the hairless bats. A faint yellow glow heralded the dawn.

If the *Nova* hadn't sailed, there was still hope.

Gavin drove himself to his feet, prowled the debris in search of the road. He started hundreds of the half-human scavenger bats into whispering, squeaking flight, stumbled across countless bodies. The raiders had been thorough.

At length he found the paved highway, began to follow it by feel.

A wind was blowing across the road. Gavin had to fight it like a man fording a stream against a strong current. The light, though, continued to brighten until he could make out the trace beneath his feet. Then the towering bulk of the *Nova* loomed dead ahead.

She wasn't gone! Gavin flung himself gasping on the ground, trembling with exhaustion.

He rested only long enough to control his trembling muscles, then began to skirt the ship towards the blind spot in the rear. He stayed out of sight. He had no desire to be spied by a possible watch posted at the scanner.

The disposal chute was just forward of the rear jets. Gavin reached it unobserved, as far as he could see, and began to worm his way up the inside of the

tube like a climber ascending a chimney. He reached the lock and got his shoulder beneath it. The lock had been designed to operate in space where the pressure inside the ship helped seal it. Now, aided by Jupiter's dense atmosphere, he succeeded in prying the lock up and scrambling into the trap.

Ten minutes later, he climbed out of the chute directly aft of the galley. The air was warm and light, bringing him the odor of cooking soup.

The passage was deserted.

Gavin slipped into the escape well which led from the engine room to the *Nova's* outer skin, clambered downward again. He stepped from the escape well softly into the engine room itself.

At first he thought it was deserted. Then he discovered a guard posted beside the sealed door in the aft bulkhead. Gavin had never seen him before. He was a big Terran in coarse outer garments. He was facing half away from the T.I.S. agent, holding a dart gun.

Gavin slipped his fingers through his brass knucks. He edged cautiously from behind the *Nova's* cyclotron, crept up on the man with the stealth of a ferret. At the last moment, the fellow heard him and swung around.

Gavin dipped him behind his ear with the weight of his shoulder back of the blow. The guard's head banged against the steel bulkhead. He slipped nervelessly to a sitting posture, tumbled sideways. His breath bubbled with a rattling sound from his mouth. Then he stopped breathing.

WITHOUT bothering to check his pulse, Gavin turned to the control panel. The fuel gauge showed a comfortable surplus.

Ears straining to catch any untoward sound, he slowly pulled down the lever which dumped the fuel, watched the gauge with a growing tensivity of nerves.

The level in the gauge dropped tantalizingly slowly, as the liquid fuel bubbled out of the tanks onto the surface of Jupiter to saturate the soil. It was still a half-inch from the empty symbol when he heard voices.

Someone was descending the ladder into the engine room.

Gavin's jaw set; his lips thinned. With his left hand he drew his dart gun, but he didn't release the dumping lever. The gauge showed an three-eighths of an inch, then a quarter. A pair of boots descended into his range of vision followed by the legs and waist of a man.

The man reached the deck, faced around and stared at the T.I.S. agent in astonishment. "Don't move!" began Gavin.

Another voice from up the ladder barked "Drop that gun!"

Gavin's eyes flashed upward. He saw a man's head, shoulder and arm through the circular ladder well. The man seemed to be lying on the deck above covering him through the opening with a dart gun. Gavin dropped his own automatic.

"Take your hand off that lever!" the man snapped.

Gavin flicked his eye to the gauge. The last of the fuel was flowing from the tanks. He released the lever, straightened his shoulders.

Let them do what they pleased to him now, he thought, they were too late. The *Nova* was grounded!

The second man descended the ladder and the pair of them regarded him curiously. They were both big men, Terrans in baggy outer garments like the guard whose skull Gavin had cracked.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the first man in a flat voice.

These men were bad. They didn't play at it. They didn't try to be. It was etched in their cold eyes and tight mouths.

Gavin moistened his lips. "Murdock. Third assistant-engineer."

"Another one," exclaimed the second man in faint surprise. "I thought we'd bagged the lot."

The other grunted. "We'd better take him to Y."

Gavin was searched and then hustled up the ladder into the officer's mess. As he was propelled through the door, conversation died in the messroom, and four pairs of eyes turned on him curiously.

Gavin controlled his surprise. Villanowski was there, ironed to his chair, his homely features taut with strain. At the table to the left of Villanowski sat the emaciated factor. He wasn't ironed. Neither was Nadia Petrovna. She had

changed into crisp shorts and was leaning forward, lips parted in surprise.

But it was the fourth man who drew the T.I.S. agent's attention.

He sat between Nadia Petrovna and the factor, lolling back in his chair indolently, a sheaf of papers spread on the table before him. His face was like a death mask in which the coloring, the lines had been painted by a machine. It was perfect, but without life.

Then Gavin realized that it was a mask. The man's whole face was a lie, even to the realistic mole on his chin.

He leaned across the table. "Who's this?" he asked in a strong harsh voice.

"He says his name's Murdock. Claims he was third assistant-engineer. We found him down in the engine room. He's killed Peters and dumped all the fuel."

Nadia drew in her breath sharply, looked frightened. The factor's fleshless features blackened with rage. Even Villanowski glanced up, a look of surprise and dawning hope in his eyes. Only the man in the mask didn't change expression.

"Go back to your post," he ordered Gavin's captors. "We'll take care of Mr. Murdock." Then, when they had left, he said, "You were contacted by my—ah—coworker on Venus, Murdock. Mr. X, he called himself." He chuckled, the noise issuing from between unsmiling painted lips like the voice of an automaton. "For the sake of convenience, you can term me Mr. Y."

Gavin didn't say anything.

"You have presented us with a problem," Mr. Y went on.

"Where's Cabot?" Gavin interrupted.

"Dead."

"The chief astrogator, the crew?"

"All dead. In fact, we thought we'd wiped the slate clean."

The factor suddenly slammed the table with his bony fist. "What are you playing with him for, Y? I've sacrificed everything. The cantonment, the slaves. I demand that he be done away with before he can contrive any more damage."

Y REGARDED the factor with venomous amber eyes, the only living features in his death mask. "Has it occurred to you to wonder *why* Mr. Murdock dumped the *Nova's* fuel?"

The factor started.

"Mr. Murdock," said Y, turning back to Gavin, "what persuaded you to ground the *Nova*?"

Gavin's lips thinned. He didn't say anything. Y continued to regard him a moment. Then he asked Nadia, "I believe you suspected Murdock of being an agent of United Spaceways, Miss Petrovna?"

Before the girl could answer the factor broke in again. "Why can't we use the *Nova's* special space drive?"

"You're referring to the machinery of the little death," rejoined Y. "But I thought you knew. It can't operate until the *Nova* has attained a certain velocity. That much we've ascertained from Mr. Villanowski."

"Then we're trapped!" The factor leaped to his feet. His agility in the increased gravity was amazing. Gavin realized that the long years the factor had spent on Jupiter had trained his muscles as well as wrung every ounce of extra flesh from his spare frame.

"I see that you've comprehended our position at last," said Y grimly. "What about the emergency fuel tanks at the cantonment?"

"Gone. Your damned shelling exploded them."

Y nodded. "Just as I thought. If Murdock drained the *Nova's* tanks, he must be expecting help. It will have considerable bearing on any course we plan to take, just who these aids are, how many they'll be, and when to expect them."

He returned to Gavin. "You'll spare yourself a painful experience, Murdock, if you talk now. You can't gain anything by forcing us to wring the information from you. We won't hesitate to stoop to torture."

"No," Gavin agreed. "I suppose not." He hesitated. United Spaceways and Tri-World were the two corporations most likely to want the *Nova's* space drive. Nadia suspected that he was an agent of United Spaceways. Therefore . . . he moistened his lips. "My work's done, anyway. I'm a Tri-World agent."

"But that's impossible!" Nadia burst out in sudden protest. "We . . ." She paused, looking confused as she realized she'd been tricked.

Y said, "That was very clever, Mur-

dock. Yes. I'm working for Tri-World. Miss Petrovna and my good friend, the factor, have supplied us with valuable information and help for a price. But the knowledge won't be of any earthly use to you."

Gavin felt no triumph at the confirmation of his suspicions. What Y said was true. As soon as they had squeezed him dry, he would be silenced.

The door opened. A Terran appeared. "The slaves have all been unloaded and dispersed, sir. The bodies of the crew are buried. We're ship-shape and ready to take off."

Y put a forefinger to the chin of his death mask, rubbed the plastic gently. "Establish radio contact with the *Comet*."

"Yes sir," replied the man. "The message, sir?"

"Rendezvous cancelled. Emergency. Proceed to us at once prepared to divide fuel."

"Yes, sir." The man went out, closing the door softly behind him.

VIII

GAVIN'S HEART SANK. Of course the ship that brought Y would be hidden in the neighborhood. It would be simple enough for them to refuel the *Nova*.

Y had taken time to release the slaves and dispose of the bodies of the crew. That, Gavin surmised, was what had delayed the *Nova's* take-off long enough for him to slip aboard. Now should the *Nova* be apprehended in space, the Interplanetary patrol would be forced to release her for lack of evidence.

Villanowski glanced up. "We're licked, lad. We may as well toss in the towel."

Gavin looked at the chief engineer blankly.

"You mean," asked Y of Villanowski, "that you and Murdock are working for the same organization?"

The chief engineer laughed bitterly. "We're not working for anyone, but ourselves. You forget, Mr. Y that the four-dimensional drive isn't the only contribution I've made to interplanetary travel. General Atomic stole the others. We had hoped—" he jerked his head at Gavin "—to keep this one for ourselves!"

Gavin's mind was going in circles like a dog chasing its tail. What was Villanowski's motive?

"Go on," said Y in a foreboding voice.

Villanowski looked down at his chains. "A ship travels through space during a passage of time. It had occurred to me that if I could invert the formula and drive a ship through time during a passage of space, the crude rocket ships could be abandoned. Murdock had gotten in trouble when Transplanet was discovered to be a colonial smuggling ring. He had studied astrophysics under me at New Yale. I knew him and knew I could trust him."

Gavin swallowed and struggled to keep a grip on himself. Obviously Villanowski had something up his sleeve.

Villanowski looked at Gavin. "We needed a space ship to complete our experiments. The effect of the drive on a body at rest was startling enough to predict success if we could attain sufficient velocity."

Gavin thought he detected a faint stressing of the word "startling". Villanowski had said, "*The effect of the drive on a body at rest was startling . . .*" The *Nova* was at rest!

"I persuaded Cabot," Villanowski proceeded, "to let me install the mechanism aboard the *Nova*. Murdock was to try—"

Gavin jumped.

With a back-handed, edge-on swipe, he caught Y in the throat full on his larynx.

Nadia screamed as Y went over backwards and lay still. The factor leaped to his feet. Gavin kicked him in the belly. Spinning against the girl, he wrenched out of her hand the dart gun which she was drawing.

"The keys!" Villanowski panted. "Y has them."

Nadia opened her mouth to scream again.

"Don't." Gavin pointed the dart gun straight at her open mouth. Nadia shut it.

The factor was writhing on the deck, but Y lay like dead. Gavin found the keys and released Villanowski.

"The engine room," he cried, "we've got to reach the engine room."

"Take Y's gun," said Gavin. He turned on Nadia. "Come along. We can't leave you here to sound an alarm."

Nadia's lips were bloodless. She moved stiffly between them, Gavin's dart gun prodding her gently in the spine.

They reached the engine room without being discovered and disarmed the startled guard. Villanowski whistled a bar in C sharp and then said, "Open sesame." The door in the steel bulkhead swung soundlessly outward.

There was a faint grin on Villanowski's homely face. "Sound waves set its mechanism in operation. I read a story when I was a youngster—Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," he confessed. "When I built the lock I couldn't resist designing it to respond to those vibrations."

The ship rocked slightly.

"What's that?"

"Felt like the blow-back of an atom jet," Gavin replied tersely. "I think Y's ship, the *Comet*, is landing."

The *Nova* rocked again, more violently than before, and a faint rush of flaming jets penetrated to the engine room.

Villanowski scuttled through the door with Gavin prodding Nadia after him. The chief darted for the control board, seized a gleaming lever, slid it cautiously along a slot.

The huge spherical tube, which Gavin had observed before, began to glow gently. The yellow mist, he saw, was gathering in the outer room, but the air in their chamber remained crystal clear.

"The time field," Villanowski explained, "creates a neutral area, an oasis, around the point of generation."

Gavin rubbed his eyes. On the other side of the door was nothing! It was like looking out into the void beyond the farthest limits of the stars.

"Now, Murdock," Gavin heard Villanowski ask, "when do you expect the interplanetary patrol spacers to land?"

GAVIN wheeled around. There was an uncertain smile on Villanowski's homely features.

"How did you know?"

"The little death," Villanowski explained complacently. "When Miss Petrovna told me her dream, I knew . . ."

"You are a T.I.S. agent!" Nadia interrupted in an odd voice. She put her hand on Gavin's sleeve. "You're going to turn me over to the courts?"

Two white patches appeared at the corners of Gavin's mouth. "Sure. The patrol spacers are on their way. I couldn't turn them back now—" he paused— "even if I wanted to."

"Give me a chance, Gavin?"

He asked, "Why did you sell out to Tri-World?"

The girl lifted her eyes to his. "I was proscribed. Tri-World has granted me amnesty. That was their price. My life. I wouldn't have done it, Gavin, but I was afraid."

"Does that explain why you tried to double-cross Tri-World in the first place?"

"I told you about that."

"And what about Trev? He hid you out when you were proscribed. He got you aboard the *Nova*. Why did you sell him out to Cabot?"

"But I didn't. I—I . . ."

"Don't lie to me," he said and gripped her shoulders. "You'd made your dicker with Tri-World. Trev was in your way. He knew too much about you. He might even have got wind of what you were up to. So you went to Cabot and told him about Trev being a dealer in scientific secrets. You knew Cabot would kill him, thinking the Martian had sold out to X."

The girl flinched. "I'm not asking you to shield me, Gavin. Turn me loose. Just let me have a fighting chance to escape. Give me a chance, Gavin."

"And Cabot," Gavin continued inexorably, his pale blue eyes stony. "You delivered Cabot and the *Nova* over to Tri-World."

He turned her loose.

"Give you a chance," he repeated and gave a short bitter laugh. "A chance to do what? Double-cross me like you have everyone else?"

Nadia shrank away. "The dream!" she said in a frightened voice. "It's just as it was in the dream. You laughed!"

Villanowski interrupted sadly. "You weren't dreaming during the little death. We're only equipped with three dimensional sense organs. We're blind to everything but the immediate instant. But time's a dimension. It's co-existent. When the *Nova* was projected across time, your

entire life was spread out around you. What you actually did was experience a segment of your life. It happened to be a segment in the future."

Nadia's lips were bloodless. "You guessed when I told you about the dream?"

"I didn't guess," replied Villanowski. "I knew! Miss Petrovna, if you saw the *Nova* captured by the Interplanetary Patrol through efforts of Murdock who was a T.I.S. agent, then it was inevitable that it would take place exactly as you had seen it. There was nothing any of us could do about it!"

A faint grin broke across Villanowski's homely face. "I saw that it behooved me to give Murdock a hand when and if he needed it."

Gavin said, "I think I can promise you amnesty, Villanowski. I couldn't have captured the *Nova* without your help."

"Oh, that's not all," Villanowski chuckled. "The Empire will want this space drive to power her ships. I'll be a valuable man. Even Y didn't intend to kill me until I had explained its mechanism to Tri-World's scientists."

"How long," asked Gavin abruptly, "have we been on Jupiter? I lost track after that shell knocked me out at the cantonment."

"This is the second day."

Gavin wrinkled his brow. "The patrol ships should be here in about four hours."

OUTSIDE the *Nova*, a gaping hole in space marked her position. The astounded crew of the *Comet*, who had landed prepared to refuel the captured *Nova*, eyed the eerie vacancy with mixed emotions. One of the crew flung a rock into the enveloping blackness. It disappeared. There was no sound of its falling to the ground.

The commander of the *Comet*, deprived of Y's guidance, fumed nervously. He glanced at his watch at intervals, saying at length, "If the *Nova* doesn't reappear by dark, we'll take off. We can lay up and re-establish contact by radio."

The men gathered about the maw of blackness staring into it with hypnotic fascination.

They fell an easy prey to the five sleek patrol craft which plummeted down on them three hours later.

The short Jovian day was on the wane when the *Nova* began to gather substance like a tenuous cloud. Her misty outlines grew solid. Then the port opened. Gavin Murdock appeared in the entrance.

Commandant Samuels, a grizzled veteran of the T.I.S., was the first man up the gangplank. He shook Gavin's hand. "Nice work, Murdock. But it smacks damnably of witchcraft."

The Flight Commander was right behind him, followed by the captains of the Empire's patrol spacers. The Flight Commander caught sight of two of Y's men lying unconscious just within the port.

"What the hell's this? The palace of the sleeping beauty?"

"You haven't seen the half of it," Gavin assured him with a grin. "They're lying all over the ship like that. Villanowski says the effects last about an hour. Better lock them up before they come to."

"Villanowski?" echoed the T.I.S. Commandant. "He's not dead, is he?"

"No," said Gavin, surprised at the anxiety in the Commandant's voice.

"Good!" growled Samuels. He lowered his voice to a subdued roar. "Ticklish mission. I'm supposed to persuade him to accept a post on the Empire's Bureau of Research. They're afraid his space drive will fall into wrong hands. But Villanowski's such an embittered old goat, he'll probably . . ."

There was a faint chuckle behind Gavin's

Villanowski, who had come up unobserved, said, "Your diplomacy, Commandant Samuels, is unique." There was a broad grin on his homely face. "I couldn't think of opposing such finesse."

The grizzled T.I.S. Commandant's features flamed an apoplectic red. Then he burst into laughter, wiped his eyes, and blew his nose.

"Where's Nadia?" Gavin asked sharply.

"Ironed to my old chair in the officer's mess." Villanowski handed Gavin the keys.

Gavin passed them on to the Commandant. He gave a terse but concise report, while the men filed aboard and began to cart the unconscious Tri-World agents off to the patrol spacers.

Y was found to be dead, the blow on his esophagus having killed him. When the mask was stripped from his face, Com-

mandant Samuels identified him in amazement as the chief of Tri-World's gestapo.

"We caught X, too," he said. "We received a flash aboard the flagship that X has been captured in space."

"What was he charged with?"

"Piracy. Y's men will be tried on the same charges. Tri-World, of course, will disclaim any connection, but she'll have to rebuild her gestapo from top to bottom."

GAVIN moved aside to allow two men with a stretcher to pass out the lock. The body of the factor lay on the stretcher looking thin as a straw. He was alive, Gavin noted, seeing his chest move faintly.

"This gives the death blow to the slave trade," the Commandant began. Then he realized Gavin wasn't listening.

Nadia Petrovna followed the stretcher. Her hands were in irons and a guard walked beside her. She passed silently between the men, her black eyes flashing Gavin a look of hate before she descended the gangplank.

"Mark my word," said Commandant Samuels grumpily, "that girl will get off with a light sentence. She'll run true to form and sell Tri-World down the river. She'll be the prosecution's principal witness."

Gavin shrugged.

"Which reminds me," put in Villanowski. "Since the Empire's so anxious for me to return to the fold, I don't want to appear too eager."

"Eh?" A pained expression rippled the T.I.S. Commandant's ruddy features.

"I'd like the chief engineer's rating aboard the first ship to reach the stars." There was a wistful note in Villanowski's voice.

"There shouldn't be any hitch there," the Commandant agreed in a relieved tone. "You're the logical man to head an expedition outside the system."

"What about a third assistant-engineer?" Gavin interrupted.

"We work pretty well together," said Villanowski.

Gavin's lean freckled face broke into a grin. "It's a bargain."

The two men solemnly shook hands



In the vision plate grew a tiny dot . . .

DISTRESS SIGNAL

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

Illustrated by MARTIN

Marooned! On the cold satellite of a dying sun, light-years away from home . . . For Rex there was only one escape. But Carl called it murder!

THE YEARS PASSED relentlessly, ticked off—one, two three, four—by the big lone planet Worta as it moved with ponderous sureness around the dying red star. Sometimes, in the

first year after they were marooned, the two runaway boys, Carl Wyant and Rex Oberling, crawled from the grottoes, chambers and labyrinthine tunnels which the Wortans had driven deep beneath

the planet's crust, and with a chill loneliness looked out into the vastness of space where the stars brooded. One of those stars, thirty-five light years away, was Sol, around which swung the planet Earth! They could not think of Earth without a brightness coming to their eyes.

Sometimes the younger boy, then seventeen, would whisper, "I wish we'd never left home, Carl."

And Carl would say, "But we left. So let's take our medicine like men."

Yes, their leaving home, leaving their parents, their friends, their whole world, could not be changed. Yet it seemed to them that their punishment was out of all proportion to their crime. Thinking back on it, Carl Wyant no longer remembered the petty grievance against his parents which made him decide to run away.

Mainly, of course, it had been because his father dropped his keys to the interstellar space-ship he had recently requisitioned from the Space Council. Both Carl and his buddy, Rex, the young fellow who lived next door and belonged to the same Scout Troop, had been caught up with the idea of visiting the stars, without parental supervision. To visit the stars! That was a thrilling thought.

At first they planned to be gone a month. But after landing on one of the Centaurian planets, four and a half light years away, the tremendous excitement that gripped them burned away thoughts of their parents, who must certainly be suffering agonies because of their disappearance. Beyond Centauri were other stars—and others beyond them.

They never tired as the sub-etheric warp hurled them through the dark reaches of infinity at several times light-speed. For the first time, they were living.

By this time, the alarm had gone throughout the known universe. Two boys on the loose. Carl, an expert at Morse Code, deciphered the wild dit-dit-da's.

"Boy, are they looking for us!"

Rex's deep chest came out. "We'll be pretty famous when we get back, I guess." The thought pleased him. "Those smart alegs that always picked on me at school will change their tune."

"Ah, Rex, nobody ever picked on you." Carl was slimmer than Rex, though a year older. He added, "All you had to do was

join in the fun and you'd have got along swell."

A dangerous flush crept up from Rex's thick, powerful neck. "I say they picked on me."

Carl said hastily, "Okay, okay." He dropped the subject. Sometimes Rex could be pretty touchy. But he was handy to have around and most of the time was a good guy. Both fellows had studied celestial navigation and mechanics, but Rex had it all over Carl when it came to handling the small ship, so Carl let him take the controls most of the time.

SUDDENLY the ship had gone haywire. Neither Carl nor Rex was technician enough to understand that the etheric-warp engines had been overdriven. The engines, down to the last accumulator cell, exploded with a mighty, tearing roar that blew gaping holes in bulkheads, deck-plates, and overheads. Carl was knocked out, but Rex held on.

He crash-landed the ship—on Worta, the lone planet of the unlisted, dying red star. The ship landed in a snow-bank, and the heat of the landing turned tons of snow into steaming, boiling water. By the time they had inventoried the situation, there was a smooth lake of ice around them and the ship was frozen in up to the edge of the airlocks.

Rex said shakily, "We'll have to use the auxiliary engines."

Which was a bit optimistic. The auxiliaries weren't etheric-warppers. They were rocket engines. The fuel a ship like this carried would take it a few billion miles, but what was that in the vastness of interstellar space, with the nearest solar system two light-years away?

Carl's long slim fingers bit mercilessly into the palms of his hands. His voice was a thin cry of protest, drifting out over the sterile vistas of Worta, the ice planet.

"Rex, we're done for. We can't get back. We're marooned."

They were marooned, but not done for. The Wortans found them one day and took them to their city a thousand feet under the planet. These Wortans, the few of them that remained, were quiet, kindly people. Ages ago, they had fought their last retreat from the bitter surface cold.

They had dug beneath the crust. They were savages now, their former mighty civilization forgotten, and were unlearned, save in agriculture and the skillful breeding of such fur-and-meat-producing animals as the *col*, the *friga*, the *hask-nor*. And, since they were human in form, themselves, they accepted these strangers that came among them.

They never came to the surface of Wortá, but that unexplainable sense of theirs which enabled them to perceive disharmony, much as one flinches at a sour discord, brought them up to investigate.

Carl was grateful to them for their simple wisdom, their understanding. From the first, however, Rex was a "sour chord" among them. An inner conceit, perhaps growing out of a race consciousness, painted him with an unmasked hostility.

But it was all of a year after their arrival before M'hört, chief of the Wortans, revealed his feelings to Carl. He drew Carl into his *meegan*—his rock-dwelling—one day. M'hört was tall as Carl, but his eyes were faceted and insect-like, great horny reptilian lumps stood out on his bony-joints, and his smoothly-scaled skin reflected the eternal fluorescence of this underground land like a polished mirror.

Carl's smile was rueful when M'hört explained about Rex. "Rex never was one to get along with people. He told me you people don't like him."

"How sad!" said M'hört.

"He's never stopped dreaming that we might get back to Earth."

"If only," said M'hört, "he would join us at our festivals as you do! If only he would laugh when we gather for meals! But, ah, he will do none of these things. Many times he sits in his *meegan* and broods. You say he insists there is a way to return to your planet?"

Carl was embarrassed for his friend. "When we first landed," he explained, "Rex thought that somehow we could use the auxiliaries."

"Ah, yes," said M'hört, trying hard to understand these things which were strange to him. "The auxiliaries."

"You see, we can manufacture unlimited quantities of rocket fuel with the fuel-generator that most ships carry. It's a

catalytic process, the raw material being any fairly dense rock.

"The auxiliaries were a sort of obsession with Rex. I couldn't control him. In the few days before you found us, he manufactured seven or eight tons of merbohydrate. He filled the ship full. I let him have his way. We lifted the ship and left Wortá. Rex was certain we could find another planet and get back to Earth by a stepping-stone method."

"Ah, but there are no other planets near enough," said M'hört, recalling this fact which Carl had previously taught him.

"Within light-years. As I say, I let Rex have his way until half the fuel was used up. Then I had to fight him."

Carl looked ashamedly at his fists. "I knocked him out as we came back to Wortá. But somehow he never gave up the idea that we could use the auxiliaries somehow."

"How very sad! And you say there is little chance of the Earth people coming for you?"

"Very little. Wortá and its sun aren't even entered in the *Star Catalogue*. It's an unlisted system, although the Stellar Survey Institution has been working like crazy the past hundred years to survey the whole works."

M'hört touched the boy's hand sympathetically. "Someday they will come for you! But, in the meantime, it would be wonderful if your friend saw the futility of his ways."

DURING the first year of their stay on Wortá, Rex stayed close to Carl, confiding in him, making those trips to the surface of the snowed-under world. Then he took to wandering the great winding corridors and chambers and dead underground cities of Wortá alone. Carl would have liked to explore with him, for there was an unending fascination in this dying civilization. Once upon a time the Wortans had been great. The quaint webbed architecture of the spired and domed buildings, the delicate traceries on the walls and the sculptured figures standing in the squares—these were a timeless wonder. But Rex didn't want Carl along, for Rex had closed up clam-like, his broad, square face held a sullen

fanaticism, and Carl knew he had his mind set on escape.

Carl went to Rex's *meegan* and sat on his spider-silk chair and whiled away the time by reading a scroll from the Wortan library until Rex should return. Both Carl and Rex had learned the complex language, the reading, the writing, the speaking of it, though Carl was much the more proficient.

Rex came in silently, a big man-size fellow with pale, beardless cheeks, dressed Indian-like in the thin, cured leather of the *col*. His moccasins padded and Carl looked up from the scroll with a start.

Rex said shortly, "Hello, Carl." He threw himself on the pile of sleeping-furs in the corner, locked his hands behind his head and stared straight up at the fluorescent ceiling with hard, unblinking eyes.

Carl uncomfortably put the scroll away. "Rex, I want to have a talk with you."

"Shoot," said Rex.

"You're not making it very easy for yourself, Rex."

"Oh! You're going to start moralizing again!"

"I wouldn't call it moralizing. I'm getting fed up with the way you act, if you want it straight. The Wortans are swell people and I get along with them fine. But it's just as if I was marooned alone. What I mean is, I don't have anybody to talk to."

Rex's lips curled in a half-smile. "Maybe you haven't treated me half-decent, either, if you want to know it."

"I haven't!"

"Nope. You want to stick here the rest of your life in these crummy, cold, underground rat-holes. No soap. I'm going to get back to Earth somehow."

"The auxiliaries," Carl said sarcastically.

Rex came to his knees with a violent motion, eyes burning. "Don't talk to me like that, Carl! I've got a way to get out of here."

"Yeah?" Carl refused to be intimidated. "How's the master-mind going to work it?"

Rex paused and then said slowly, "I'm going to create a distress signal."

"Distress sig—" Carl stiffened incredulously. "Rex, you're nuts!"

Rex smiled a slow, secret, satisfied smile. "I don't think so. 'Member when we were scouts? 'Member that time we got lost in the Big Neck Valley? We burned green wood and got a smoky fire started and used a blanket to send up a smoky SOS signal. We knew the rest of the troop was somewhere near and would see the signal. They came and got us.

"Well, this is the same thing. We're lost. This solar system never has been discovered, but we both know we're still in the known universe. All around us, maybe no more than fifty or sixty light-days off, are traffic lanes. Passenger ships, freighters. Then there's the SSI. It has ships everywhere. I figure if we send out a distress signal they're bound to see it over the sub-etheric, fifth order ray detector. They'll see that signal as soon as I get started."

Carl was quiet. He was worried. This was a turn of affairs he hadn't expected. He remembered how fixed Rex's mind was on the subject of escape. Too fixed. Almost fanaticism. He hoped with all his heart Rex wasn't sick. Yet that the kid should kneel there, with that brightness in his eyes, and suggest sending up a distress signal which was to be sent across billions of miles of space—

"All right, Rex," he said gently. "I'm listening. You're to send up a distress signal and attract the attention of a Stellar Survey ship."

A derisive smile grew on Rex's lips. "You're listening," he scoffed. "Liar. You think I'm bats. But I'll show you."

He lay down again and turned his face to the wall and shortly Carl heard his deep breathing. Carl left.

That was in the second year. But another year passed. Carl found himself growing up. He had the shoulders of a man, and he could look back with a whimsical ruefulness on the immaturity which had led him and Rex to run away from home like callow ten-year-olds.

Carl longed for Earth, no less than Rex. Unlike Rex, he subdued the longing, but whenever his lonesome thoughts threatened to engulf him he diverted himself by climbing the thousand feet to the planet's surface. It was on such a voyage that he found the space-ship gone.

Carl and Rex had agreed to leave the ship on an eminence, so that if anybody did come they would see the ship and investigate. But the ship was undeniably gone, and Carl knew Rex had taken it.

He stood on the icy mesa where they had parked it, and Carl looked out on the drear vastness of Worta with sick eyes. He refused to believe Rex had gone away and left him. He stayed there for hours, waiting, then reluctantly went back into the bowels of Worta.

Rex showed up for the evening meal, though, taking his place at the great long *yee*—the festival table—where the forty-odd Wortans who remained had their meals. After the meal, Carl cornered him.

Rex twisted away from Carl's detaining hand. "I've got a right to take a ride if I want to, haven't I?"

Carl felt guilty at having even asked, the way Rex put it. Rex did have that right. Carl let it slide. But the frequent disappearance of the ship troubled him increasingly. Every time he stood hip-deep in snow on the upper world and saw the ship was gone, a chill worked through his heart. He would find himself looking into the lowering dark sky at the impersonal stars. Fastening his gaze on the dying red star around which Worta revolved. It was not a large sun. In another million years it would burn out. Then Worta would truly be dead.

HE WAS convinced there was more to Rex's use of the ship than the loneliness of a nineteen-year-old wanting to take a ride. Rex had a purpose. Yet he let it slide until the end of the fourth year. Then his interference was not his doing. He was wandering far underground when a runner came panting up. "M'hort must see you in his *meegan*," the runner panted.

Carl went at once, heart constricted. Nothing ever happened in these underground caves. Whatever M'hort wanted to see him about was urgent.

M'hort met him at the entrance and gripped his arm. His eyes bored into Carl's. "I sense that something is wrong, friend Carl," he said. "It is a great terror in my breast. It is about Rex, of course. I see—I see a great flame. Now tell me what you know!"

Carl blurted out the story. "He's making plenty long trips someplace," he said huskily. "He's been caving in a big hillside of rock these past couple years. Making merbohydrate."

M'hort's fear showed in his eyes. "There is no place for him to visit?"

"Not a planetary body within countless billions of miles."

M'hort paced. "We should not have this trouble," he said fretfully. "I am most annoyed with Rex. Look at us of Worta. Do we not know we are doomed, that the unhealthful conditions beneath Worta are producing a sterility that will soon destroy us as if we had never been? Yet we are gay and take what there is of life. Why must Rex make us all unhappy? And I feel he is planning—something that can never be undone."

He hesitated. "Carl, this merbohydrate—it is dangerous?"

Carl laughed. "Just about the peppiest explosion known to the human race." He touched M'hort's arm. "I'll find out what he's planning."

Carl went straight to the surface and stood in the cave opening, his breath hanging in puffy clouds of white. Rex was at that moment letting down the ship's gangplank. He wheeled the fuel-generator out on its short tripod.

All day Carl watched as Rex set "pills" of merbohydrate into the rock face of the snow-shorn, worked-over hill and detonated them. Tons of chipped rock cascaded toward the mouth of the generator. Rex panted as he worked with a square-point shovel. The twenty-pound merbohydrate ingots came rolling out at the rate of one a minute. Rex carried the ingots into the ship.

As the red star was about to settle for the night behind the sharply-silhouetted horizon, Rex wheeled the generator back into the ship. About that time, Carl panted up the hill to the mesa level. "Rex!" he called.

Rex stood scowling near the airlock. Plainly, Carl was not welcome.

Carl panted, "Going for a ride?"

Rex's shoulders—broader by far than Carl's—bunched up. He growled, "Yeah. *I'm taking a ride.*"

"Swell. I'll go with you."

"Nope."

"Why not?"

Rex turned and, with a single motion, jumped to the edge of the airlock. He jeered, "I don't want any boy scouts along with me this trip. G'bye!"

Carl felt a rage he had never really shown Rex. He leaped. All it got him was a bad fall on the slippery ice underfoot. When he finally got to his feet, the airlock door was whining shut. A few seconds later, the ship leaped away, the rocket apertures throwing out their blating swords of energy. The ship roared skyward.

Carl stood looking after it, a wet crawling on his skin. He was terribly frightened. The worst part of it was, he didn't know what was frightening him. He turned and started back down the ladders to the underground city.

Four years, he thought, as he climbed the ladders down. Four years we've been here. It seems forever since we ran away that night. And for two of those years, Rex has been busy with something. Manufacturing merbohydrate and taking trips out into space. Why?

Distress signal!

The two words hit him with smashing impact. He wrapped both hands around the ladder, to keep himself from falling down the shaft. He trembled and shook and dizzy spots grew in his eyes.

He raised his head and shouted, "The fool!"

The lonesome echoes of his own madness came crashing back at him. He hugged the ladder and wept. He could not say why he was crying, except he felt he had been betrayed somehow. He knew he was young, too young to deal with this tremendous horror Rex was planning. And M'hort had sensed that horror.

After awhile, he started climbing up again. There was a flame in his heart, a heat that rived him, made him something less than human. He was going to kill Rex if Rex didn't talk, didn't tell him the details of the plan. As for the main plan, Carl already knew it.

On the surface, he waited. The sun came up, moved redly toward noon. The space-ship came back. As Rex appeared in the opening airlock, face perspiring, lips set with a cruel satisfaction that did not belong to youth, Carl jumped him. It

was over in a moment. Rex lay unconscious.

WHEN Rex came to, Carl had the ship in the sky again, driving toward the dying red sun. He left the controls again, and stood over Rex, who was rope-bound to a chair.

"I think," Carl said, his eyes burning, "I've put two and two together at last. Took me a whale of a long time to do it, too. Now go ahead and talk."

Rex's square face was set into a disinterested mold. He looked Carl up and down, shrugged. "Sure, I'll talk. But it won't do any good, Carl. It's already fixed. Nothing you can do can change it. And it's funny you picked out today to check up on me."

"Just today?" Carl asked hollowly.

"Just today." Rex spoke so calmly it was as if all the acid bitterness in him had been alkalized in one moment. For the first time in many months, he was a kid again, without a secret thought, without an equivocation on his lips.

Rex said, "There's two hundred thousand tons of merbohydrates out there, Carl. It's taken me two years to manufacture the stuff. The most powerful explosive ever invented.

"You see, Carl, I wasn't as crazy as you thought when I said I was going to send up a distress signal. It's a matter of nine or ten hours. And you can't stop it."

Carl stood with eyes closed, muscles iron-hard. "Rex," he said, "give me the position coordinates of that two hundred thousand tons of merbohydrate."

Rex gave him the coordinates. Carl set the ship on a slightly different course. An hour passed. The Worton sun grew until it was a red globe glued to space.

Carl operated the photo-amplifiers, set the telescopic perilens into position. Space expanded. In the vision plate grew a tiny dot that seemed to rush rapidly into sight though it was still several hundred thousand miles away. It resolved itself into detail—countless neatly stacked and baled ingots of merbohydrate, each bale in turn attached to another by short lengths of wire. The mass was a thirty-foot cube.

In the matter of size, it was a speck in space.

In the matter of explosive potentialities,

it was a bomb of untold violence, falling toward the dying red star.

Carl got another notch of speed from the ship. He was abruptly aware that sweat had formed stickily on his body. A blast of furnace heat was already radiating from the bulkheads.

Behind him, Rex said derisively, "Save yourself the trouble. You can't catch up with it. It's inside the boiling zone, you idiot."

"For two years, Carl, that mass of merbohydrate was on an orbit about the sun. Every once in a while I'd come out and add more to the main mass. Today I figured I had enough. I hauled it out of its orbit, took it as close as I could to the sun. Right smack to the edge of the boiling zone. Then I gave it a running start and let go. The sun and the merbohydrate will meet at the convergence of their trajectories."

"Then what?"

Rex laughed. "Distress signal!"

IT WAS hotter as they moved toward the sun. Carl was sopping. The very air danced. Under him the chair was beginning to burn him. The cosmic bomb was a full three hundred thousand miles inside the boiling zone. Carl could never catch up with it. He wordlessly banked the ship in a long half-circle that put it a hundred miles inside the boiling zone, and then on the road out.

He poured in every ounce of power he could, while thoughts zig-zagged crazily in his head. He had gone beyond rage. He had ascended the scale of human emotion and he was numb.

When the ship was near Wortá, he turned on Rex. "What," he said, "do you expect to gain by this?"

"Rescue."

"What about the Wortans?"

A simmering violence burst in Rex's eyes. His muscles bulged against his bonds. "The Wortans!" he mimicked. "The Wortans! If you love those Wortans so much why don't you plan to live with them the rest of your life? They never did like me, and that goes double."

Carl said gently, "You don't murder people you don't like."

"Murder?" the word came sharply. He

relaxed. "They don't use their sun. They won't miss it."

"How about their planet?"

Rex looked at him. Then his eyes shifted. He muttered, "The explosion won't touch Wortá. Too far away."

Carl said, "The explosion will rip that planet crossways and endways. It'll turn it inside out. It'll tear it up into little pin-size lumps, roast and boil the lumps, and dissipate the lumps into gases made of dancing free electrons. That big gob of gas will puff itself out over a few light-years of space, and that will be the end of Wortá. Maybe you didn't think of that. Or maybe you convinced yourself it wouldn't happen."

A trapped expression grew on Rex's face. "It *won't* happen!" he shouted. He screamed, "Let me alone! Stop badgering me! You can't change anything. I didn't know if it'd hurt Wortá or not. I didn't care any more. I came back to Wortá to get you, just in case something happened I didn't figure on. All I cared about was getting home. I want to go home!"

He dropped his head, drawing in great tearing sobs, his broad shoulders quaking.

Carl said calmly, "Well, we're going back to Wortá to get the Wortans."

Rex raised his head, his face violent with protest. "We haven't got time."

"We'll take time."

Rex cursed him viciously.

"In the meantime," Carl continued without change of tone, "sit there. Start thinking. Think about M'hört and the other Wortans. Think of how they saved our lives and accepted us as if we're part of them. Think of all the hospitality you accepted at their yee."

Carl's voice was rising. "Think of their dead cities. Think of all the dead men who built those cities and the artists who made those cities beautiful with their statues and paints. Then think how you will have destroyed all that."

Rex said nothing. Color was flooding from his face, his lips thinning until they formed one pale slash across his face. Carl looked at him with wordless contempt, then swung about to maneuver the ship for the final thousand miles to a landing.

A gong sounded from the instrument board.

IT CAME so suddenly that Carl jumped halfway from the bucket-seat. He gripped the edge of the board, eyes forced open so wide they hurt. He waiting, knowing he had misheard. The gong came again.

Behind him, Rex made an insane gurgling nose. "They've come! They've come!"

Carl's hands were shaking violently as he adjusted the televue, snapped in the audio. In the televue gray clouds formed, took on shape, and that shape became the head and shoulders of a man in the trim, pale blue uniform of the Stellar Survey Institution.

Small muscles around the man's eyes and mouth contracted as he saw Carl. He frowned. He said, "You are Carl Wyant and Rex Oberling?"

"Yes, sir," Carl said humbly.

"You will stay where you are. We will pick you up in seven hours. You may consider that a command."

"Yes, sir," replied Carl. "But we can't obey it. I'd advise you, sir, not to come within ten billion miles of the dwarfed star. It's a potential super-nova. We will meet you at—"

The officer's glance sharpened. "You're talking nonsense. Why is Oberling bound in that chair?"

Carl said wearily, "It's a long story, sir. May I ask your present position?"

The Stellar Survey man's image grew a little in the plate as he leaned forward, as if to get a better look at Carl's face. He drew back. He said, "We are at present roughly twenty-two light-days distant, viewing you by instantaneous fifth-order reception."

"That's even better than ten billion miles, sir. If you stay where you are and keep your beam on, we can signal you when we get a billion miles from Worta. Then you can come forward and pick us up."

Before the officer could say what was starting on his lips, Carl banged his hand excitedly on the instrument board and shouted hysterically, "I'm warning you, sir, I'm warning you!"

The man looked unsettled. His glance wavered. "Very well, Wyant. It's a strange proceeding, but I trust you. We will expect you." The screen blanked.

Fifteen minutes later Carl landed the ship. He got up stiffly. Rex sat motionless, eyes turned straight ahead, unblinking, unseeing.

"I'm leaving you here until I get the Wortans," Carl told him. "Don't try anything silly."

Rex moved his head until his eyes rested on Carl's. He said quietly, "Carl, for your own good, don't bother. Do you think for a minute the Wortans are going to leave their planet at this stage of the game? They're done for anyway. You wouldn't expect a bunch of corpses to get out of their coffins and try a different coffin, would you? That's the way it is with the Wortans."

When Carl said nothing, Rex said, in that same quiet voice, "Carl, I know."

Carl turned uncertainly away, moved to the instrument board. His own voice sounded far away. "I'll convince them," he said. "I'll bring them back. They've got to come."

Carl took all the keys out of the instrument board. Without the keys, the ship was inoperable. He left the ship, stumbled as in a dream across the dreary wastes of lifeless snow. Then, as the cold struck deep at his lungs, his thoughts clarified, and he went with quick, driven panic.

How soon the merbohydrate would strike the red star he had no idea. But it would be soon. He made a break-neck descent. He burst into that small section of one of the underground cities where the Wortans lived, went straight to the meegan of M'hort.

He told M'hort the whole story.

M'hort sat cross-legged. A resigned sadness lidded his eyes. Carl knew his answer. He dropped to his knees. "No! You can't speak for the rest of your people. They want to live. And the Wortans can still be great. Why—why, we'll give you a planet in our own system!"

M'hort smiled as if at a secret, foolish thought, his eyes averted. Then he arose and drew Carl up with him. His eyes glittered with the reflected fluorescence of the underground. Carl was held rigid.

M'hort said, "You are youth, and you answer as youth would answer. I am age, Carl, and I answer as only age can answer. We will stay."

"What is there to fear? What is there to grieve for? It is a great providence that sent you here to us. You see! Soon we would all have died, but lingeringly. Now there is glory to dying, for there will be no ugly pain. And we will not be unknown to the other peoples of the universe, Carl, for you will carry our immortality."

"That," said Carl, bitterly, "is a hell of an immortality."

M'hort laughed. "It is better than we expected. Now go."

And Carl went, blindly.

He reached the ship in less than an hour. He entered, dogged the airlocks shut, went slowly toward the transparent door of the control room. He threw open the door and stood looking at the empty chair and the tattered strands of rope which had held Rex. He was drained of emotion, though, and he leaned weakly against the door jamb. Finally he moved, left the ship, and spent another hour looking for Rex.

He didn't find him. Rex had consciously obscured his tracks. He went back to the ship, smiling without mirth. That was funny. Rex drove himself crazy figuring out a way to get back to Earth for four years. Then he backed out. He had chosen the same path as the Wortans, and maybe for as good a reason. . . .

HE DROVE straight away from the dying red sun. A billion miles out, he was picked up by the stately ship of the Stellar Survey. He was ushered into the presence of the officer who had appeared in the televue plate. That individual was cold in his welcome.

"You've cost the tax-payers a mint of money," he growled. "They've had ships on the lookout for you for four years. Where's the other young fellow?"

Carl told the story while the officer slowly tensed. Then he looked annoyed. "It seems a little extreme for Oberling to have committed suicide."

"Maybe, sir. Except that one doesn't go around destroying solar systems without a good reason. If you hadn't shown up when you did—"

"There would have been a good reason?" The officer sat silent. "Yes, I suppose so. A classical bit of irony, that. De-



stroying a sun to attract rescuers—then the rescuers spoil the drama of it by showing up ahead of time. And the funny part of it is that it would have worked."

He seemed to recollect. He hastily snapped in the televue, motioned Carl to come around to his side of the desk.

"Chances are," the officer said, consulting some figures, "We'll see a merry hell-fire in the next few minutes."

Ten minutes later, the red star exploded.

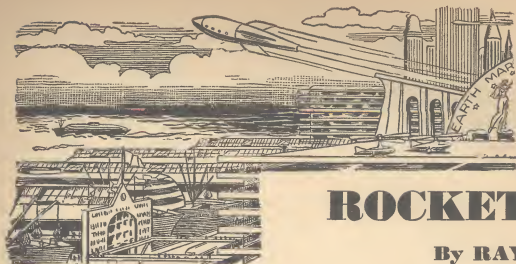
It cracked into three separate pieces. They held that position, each section racing from red to violet. That changed blindingly to magnesium white. The glare smashed at the eyeballs. The three pieces in turn shattered each other as they puffed up. Then the whole spurted into a violence that lighted all the black sky with recurring, silently throbbing sheets of shattering luminescence.

The stars were blotted out in that primeval surf of untamed energy.

The planet Wortu was caught, flamed in glory for the small part of a second.

The big space-ship trembled in every beam and partition as the wave-front of exploding light reached it.

Distress signal!



ROCKET

By RAY

Illustrated by

The first great rocket flight into space, bearing intrepid pioneers to the Moon. The world's ecstasy flared into red mob-hate when President Stanley canceled the flight. How did he get that way?

THE CROWD GATHERED to make a curious noise this cold grey morning before the scheduled Birth. They arrived in gleaming scarlet tumblebugs and yellow plastic beetles, yawning and singing and ready. The Birth was a big thing for them.

He stood alone up in his high office tower window, watching them with a sad impatience in his grey eyes. His name was William Stanley, president of the company that owned this building and all those other work-hangars down on the tarmac, and all that landing field stretching two miles off into the Jersey mists. William Stanley was thinking about the Birth.

The Birth of *what?* Stanley's large, finely sculptured head felt heavier, older. Science, with a scalpel of intense flame would slash wide the skulls of engineers, chemists, mechanics in a titanic Caesarian, and out would come the Rocket!

"Yezzir! Yezzir!" he heard the far-off, faint and raucous declarations of the vendors and hawkers. "Buy ya Rocket Toys! Buy ya Rocket Games! Rocket Pictures! Rocket soap! Rocket teethers for the tiny-tot! Rocket, Rocket, Rocket! Hey!"

Shutting the open glassite frame before him, his thin lips drew tight. Morning

after morning America sent her pilgrims to this shrine. They peered in over the translucent restraint barrier as if the Rocket were a caged beast.

He saw one small girl drop her Rocket toy. It shattered, and was folded under by the moving crowd's feet.

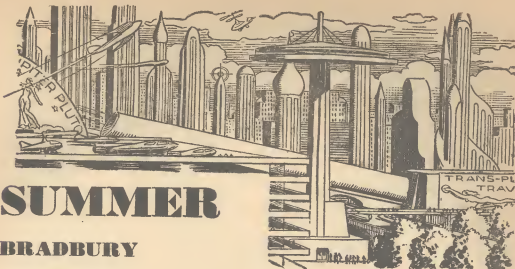
"Mr. Stanley?"

"Uh? Oh, Captain Greenwald. Sorry. Forgot you were here." Stanley measured his slow, thoughtful steps to his clean-topped desk. "Captain," he sighed wearily, "you're looking at the unhappiest man alive." He looked at Greenwald across the desk. "That Rocket is the gift of a too-generous science to a civilization of adult-children who've fiddled with dynamite ever since Nobel invented it. They—"

He got no further. The office door burst inward. A tall, work-grimed man strode swiftly in—all oil, all heat, all sunburnt, wrinkled leather skin. Rocket flame burnt in his dark, glaring eyes. He stopped short at Stanley's desk, breathing heavily, leaning against it.

Stanley noticed the wrench in the man's fist. "Hello, Simpson."

Simpson swore bitterly. "What's all this guff about you stopping the Rocket tomorrow?" he demanded.



SUMMER

BRADBURY

DOOLIN and VESTAL

Stanley nodded. "This isn't a good time for it to go up."

Simpson snorted. "This isn't a good time," he mimicked. Then he swore again. "By George, it's like telling a woman her baby's been still-born!"

"I know it's hard to understand—"

"Hard, hell!" shouted the man. "I'm Head Mechanic! I've worked two years! The others have worked, too! And the Rocket'll travel tomorrow or we'll know why!"

Stanley crushed out his cigar, inside his fist. The room swayed imperceptibly in his vision. Sometimes, one wanted to use a gun—he shook away the thought. He kept his tongue.

Simpson raged on. "Mr. Stanley, you have until three this afternoon to change your mind. We'll pull strings and you'll be out of your job by the week-end! If not—" and he said the next words very slowly, "how would your wife look with her head bashed in, *Mister Stanley*?"

"You can't threaten me!"

The door slammed in Stanley's face. Simpson was gone.

CAPTAIN GREENWALD put out a manicured hand. On one slender finger shone a diamond ring. His wrist was circled by an expensive watch. His shiny brown eyes were invisibly cupped by contact lenses. Greenwald was past fifty inside; outside he seemed barely thirty. "I advise you to forget it, Stanley. Man's

waited a million years for tomorrow."

Stanley's hand shook, lighting a cigarette. "Look here, Captain, where *are* you going?"

"To the stars, of course."

Stanley snapped out the alcohol match. "In the name of heaven, stop the melodrama and inferior semantics. What kind of thing is this you're handing the people? What'll it do to races, morals, men and women?"

Greenwald laughed. "I'm only interested in reaching the Moon. Then I'll come back to earth, and retire, happily, and die."

Stanley stood there, tall and very grey. "Does the effect of the introduction of the crossbow to English and French history interest you?"

"Can't say I know much about it."

"Do you recall what gunpowder's invention did to civilization?"

"That's irrelevant!"

"You must admit if there'd been some subjective planning with the auto and airplane, millions of lives would've been saved, and many wars prevented. An ethical code should've been written for all such inventions and strictly observed, or else the invention forfeited."

Greenwald shook his head, grinning. "I'll let you handle that half of it. I'll do the traveling. I'm willing to abide by any such rules, if you'll draw them up and enforce them. All I want is to reach the Moon first. I've got to get down-

stairs now. We're still loading the ship, you know, in spite of your decree. We expect to get around you somehow. I'm sympathetic, of course, to your beliefs. I'll do anything you say except ground the Rocket. I won't get violent, but I can't vouch for Simpson. He's a tough man, with strong notions."

They walked from the office to the dropper. Compression slid them down to ground level, where they stepped out, Stanley still re-emphasizing his beliefs. "—for centuries science has given humanity playtoys, ships, machines, guns, cars, and now a Rocket, all with supreme disregard for man's needs."

"Science," announced Greenwald as they emerged onto the tarmac, "has produced, via private enterprise, greater amounts of goods than ever in history! Why, consider the medical developments!"

"Yes," said Stanley doggedly, "we cure man's cancer and preserve his greed in a special serum. They used to say 'Starve a cold, stuff a fever.' Today's fever is materialism. All the things science has produced only touch the *Body*. When Science invents something to touch the *Mind*, I'll give it its due. No.

"You cloak your voyage with romantic terminology. Outward to the stars! you cry! Words! What's the *fact*? Why, *why* this rocket? Greater production? We have *that*! Adventure? Poor excuse to uproot Earth. Exploration? It *could* wait a few years. Lebensraum? Hardly. *Why*, then, Captain?"

"Eh?" murmured Greenwald distractedly. "Ah. Here's the Rocket, now."

They walked in the incredible Rocket shadow. Stanley looked at the crowd beyond the barrier. "Look at them. Their sex still a mixture of Victorian voodoo and clabbered Freud. With education needing reorientation, with wars threatening, with religion and philosophy confused, you want to jump off into space!"

Stanley shook his head. "Oh, I don't doubt your sincerity, Captain. I just say your timing's poor. If we give them a Rocket toy to play with, do you honestly think they'll solve war, education, unity, thought? Why, they'd propel themselves away from it so quickly your head'd swim! Wars would be fought between worlds. But if we want more wars, let's have

them *here*, where we can get at their sources, before we leap to the asteroids seeking our lost pride of race.

"What little unity we *do* have would be broken by countries and individuals clamoring and cut-throating for planets and satellites!"

Pausing, Stanley saw the mechanics standing in the Rocket shadow, hating him. Outside the barrier, the crowd recognized him; their murmur grew to a roar of disapproval.

Greenwald indicated them. "They're wondering why you waited so long before deciding to stop the Rocket."

"Tell them I thought there'd be laws controlling it. Tell them the corporations played along, smiling and bobbing to me, until the Rocket was completed. Then they threw off their false faces and withdrew the legislation only this morning. Tell them that, Captain. And tell them the legislation I planned would've meant a slow, intelligent Rocket expansion over an era of three centuries. Then ask them if they think any business man could wait even five *minutes*."

Captain Greenwald scowled. "All I want to do is prove it can be done. After I come back down, if I can help in any way to control the Rocket, I'm your man, Stanley. After I *prove* it's possible, I don't care what in hell happens . . ."

Stanley slid into his 'copter, waved morosely at the captain. The crowd shouted, waved its fists at him over the barrier. He sat watching their distorted, sullen faces. They detested him. The Rocket balloon man, the Rocket soap man, the tourists detested him.

What was more, when his son Tommy found out, Tommy would hate him, too.

HE TOOK his time, heading home. He let the green hills slide under. He set the automatic pilot and sank back into the sponge-softness, suspended in a humming, blissful dream. Music played. Cigarettes and whiskey were in reach if he desired them. Soft music. He could lapse back into the dreaming tide, dissolve worry, smoke, drink, chortle, luxuriously, sleep, forget, pull a shell of synthetic, hypnotizing objects in about himself.

And wake ten years from today with his wife disintegrating swiftly in his arms.

And one day see his son's skull shattered against a plastic wall.

And his own heart whirled and burst by some vast atom power of a starship passing Earth far out in space!

He dumped the whiskey over the side, followed it with the cigarettes. Finally, he clicked off the soft music.

There was his home. His eyes kindled. It lay out upon a green meadow, far from the villages and towns, salt-white and surrounded by tapered sycamores. As he watched, lowering his 'copter, he saw the blonde streak across the lawn; that was his daughter, Alyce. Somewhere else on the premises his son gamboled. Neither of them feared the dark.

Angrily, Stanley poured on full speed. The landscape jerked and vanished behind him. He wanted to be alone. He couldn't face them, yet. Speed was the answer. Wind whistled, roared, rushed by the hurtling 'copter. He rammed it on. Color rose in his cheeks.

There was music in the garden as he parked his 'copter in the fine blue plastic garage. Oh, beautiful garage, he thought, you contribute to my peacefulness. Oh, wonderful garage, in moments of torment, I think of you, and I am glad I own you. Like hell.

In the kitchen, Althea was whipping food with mechanisms. Her mother sat with one withered ear to the latest audio drama. They glanced up, pleased.

"Darling, so early!" she cried, kissing him. "How's the Rocket?" piped mother-in-law. "My, I bet you're proud!"

Stanley said nothing.

"Just imagine." The old woman's eyes glowed like little bulbs. "Soon we'll breakfast in New York and supper on Mars!"

Stanley watched her for a long moment, then turned hopefully to Althea. "What do you think?"

She sensed a trap. "Well, it would be different, wouldn't it, vacationing our summers on Venus, winters on Mars—wouldn't it?"

"Oh, good Lord," he groaned. He shut his eyes and pounded the table, softly. "Good Lord."

"Now, what's wrong. What did I say?" demanded Althea, bewildered.

He told them about his order preventing the flight.

Althea stared at him. Mother reached and snapped off the audio. "What did you say, young man?"

He repeated it.

Into the waiting silence came a distant "psssheew!" rushing in from the dining room, flinging the kitchen door wide, his son ran in, waving a bright red Rocket in one grimy fist. "Psssheew! I'm a Rocket! Gangway! Hi, Dad!" He swung the ship in a quick arc. "Gonna be a pilot when I'm sixteen! Hey." He stopped. "What's everybody standing around for?" He looked at Grandma. "Grammy?" He looked at his mother. "Mom?" And finally at his father. "Dad . . ." His hands sank slowly. He read the look in his father's eyes. "Oh, gosh."

BY THREE O'CLOCK that afternoon, he had showered and dressed in clean clothes. The house was very silent. Althea came and sat down in the living room and looked at him with hurt, stricken eyes.

He thought of quoting a few figures at her. Five million people killed in auto accidents since the year 1920. Fifty thousand people killed every year, *now*, in 'copters and jet-planes. But it wasn't in the figures, it was in a feeling he had to make her *feel*. Maybe he could illustrate it to her. He picked up the hand-audio, dialed a number. "Hello, Smitty?"

The voice on the other end said, clearly. "Oh, Mr. Stanley?"

"Smitty, you're a good average man, a pleasant neighbor, a fine farmer. I'd like your opinion. Smitty, if you knew a war was coming, would you help prevent it?"

Althea was watching and listening.

Smitty said, "Hell, yes. Sure."

"Thanks, Smitty. One more thing. What's your opinion of the Rocket?"

"Greatest thing in history. Say, I heard you were going to—"

Stanley did not want to get involved. He hurriedly excused himself and hung up. He looked directly at his wife. "Did you notice the separation of means from end? Smitty thinks two thing. He thinks he can prevent war; that's one. He thinks the Rocket is a great thing; that's number two. But they don't match, unfortunately."

"The Rocket isn't a means to happiness the way it'll be used. It's the wrong means."

And with a wrong means you invariably wind up with a wrong end. A criminal seeks wealth. Does he get it? Temporarily. In the end, he suffers. All because he took the wrong *means*." Stanley held his hands out, uselessly. "How can I make you understand."

Tears were in her eyes. "I understand *nothing*, and don't need to understand! Your job, they'll take it away from you and fly the Rocket anyway!"

"I'll work on the legislation again, then!"
"And perhaps be killed? No, please, Will."

Killed. He looked at his watch. Exactly three.

He answered the audio when it buzzed.
"Stanley talking."

"Stanley, this is Cross, at Cal-Tech."

"Cross! Good Lord, it's good to hear you!"

"I just heard the new-flash," said Cross. He had the same clipped, exact voice he'd had years ago, Stanley realized. "You're really on the spot this time, aren't you, Will? That's why I called. I like your ideas on machinery. I've always thought of machines, myself, as nothing but extensions of man's frustrations and emotions, his losses and compensations in life. We agree. But you're wrong this time, Will. You made a mistake today."

"Now, don't you start on me! You're my last friend," retorted Stanley tiredly. "What else could I do—destroy the rocket?"

"That would be negative. No good. Give them something positive. Tell them to go ahead," advised Cross, pleasantly enough. "Warn them, like a kindly father, of the consequences. Then, when their fingers are burnt—"

"Humanity might go down the drain," finished Stanley abruptly.

"Not if you play your cards right, control the variables. There must be some way around them without getting yourself mangled. I'm ready to help when you have a plan. Think it over."

"I still think blowing the damn thing up would be—"

"They'd build a bigger one. And they'd persecute you and your family the rest of your life," explained Cross logically. "You and I may know that science hasn't contributed one whit to man's *mental* progress,

but Mr. Everyman likes his babies diapered in disposable tissues and likes to travel from Siberia to Johnstown like an infuriated bullet. You can't stop them, you can only divert them a bit."

Stanley grasped the hand-audio, tightly. He listened.

A GREAT ROAR of 'copters sounded out in the afternoon sky, directly overhead. The house shook. Althea sprang up lithely and ran to look out. "I can't talk any more, Cross. I'll call you back. They're outside, waiting for me, now . . ."

Cross' voice faded like a dream. "Remember what I tell you. Let them go ahead."

Stanley walked to the door, opened it, stepped half through.

A radio voice boomed out of the bright blue sky.

"STANLEY!" it shouted. It was Simpson's voice. "STANLEY! COME OUT AND TALK! COME OUT AND TELL US, STANLEY! STANLEY!"

Althea would not stay in. She walked with him out onto the moist green lawn, in the open.

The heavens were flooded with 'copters whirling. The sun shook in its place. 'Copters hung everywhere, like huge hummingbirds, swiveling, whirring. Five hundred of them, at least, shadowing the lawns and shaking the house-tops.

"OH, THERE YOU ARE, STANLEY!"

Stanley shaded his eyes. His lips drew away from his teeth in a grimace, as he stared upward, tense and afraid.

"IT'S AFTER THREE O'CLOCK, STANLEY!" came the dull boom of words.

In this moment, with the spiraling 'copters suspended over his lawn, over his wife and children and house, over himself and his beliefs, Stanley swallowed, stepped back, put his hands down and let the idea grow within him. Yes, he would give them their rocket. He would give it to them. You cannot fight the children, he thought. They must have their green apples. If you refuse them, they will find a way around you. Go along with their illogical tide and make logic of it. Let the children eat their full of green apples, many, many green apples to swell their

vast stomach into sickness. Yes. A slow smile touched the corners of his mouth, vanished. The plan was complete.

The voice from the sky fell on him like an iron fist! "STANLEY! WHAT IS YOUR WORD NOW? HOW WILL YOU SPEAK NOW? WITH A THOUSAND POUNDS OF NITROGLYCERINE OVER YOUR HOME, HOW WILL YOU TALK?"

The 'copters sank, malignantly. Thunder swept the lawn. Althea's brilliant amber skirt flared in the wash of it.

"WILL THE ROCKET FLY, STANLEY?"

From the corners of his aching, straining eyes, Stanley saw his son poised in the window, watching him.

"RAISE YOUR RIGHT HAND AND WAVE IT," thundered the sky-voice. "IF THE ANSWER IS YES!"

Stanley made them wait for it. He wetted his lips with a slow tongue, then, gradually, very casually, he raised his right hand, palm up, and waved it to the thundering sky.

A torrent of exultation poured in a Niagara from the heavens. Five hundred audios blasted, cheered, exulted! The trees ripped and tore in the cyclone of energy and explosion! The noise continued as Stanley turned, took Althea's elbow, and steered her blindly back to the door.

THE little black-jet-plane dropped out of the midnight stars. Moments later, Cross was getting out of it, crossing the dark lawn, grasping Stanley's hand warmly. "Made good time, eh?"

Inside, they donned their glasses of brandy first, then got to business. Stanley outlined his plan, his contacts, his psychology. He was pleased and excited to see an extraordinary smile of approval come to Cross's pink, round face. "Excellent! Now you're talking!" cried Cross.

"I like your plan, Stanley. It places the blame right back on the people. They won't be able to persecute you."

Stanley refilled the glasses. "I'll see to it you're on the Rocket tomorrow. Greenwald—he's the captain—will co-operate, I'm certain, when the trip is over. It's up to you and Greenwald then."

They raised their glasses. "And when

it's all over," observed Cross slowly. "We'll have the long, hard struggle to revise our educational system. To begin to apply the scientific method to man's thinking, instead of just to his machines. And when we've built a logical subjective world, then it'll be safe to make machines of all and any kinds. Here's to our plan, may it be completed." They drank.

The next day two million people spread over the rolling hills, through the tiny Jersey towns, sitting atop bugs and plastic beetles. An excitement pervaded the day. The sky was a blue vacuum, the 'copters grounded by law. The Rocket lay gleaming and monstrous and silent.

At noon, the crew ambled across the tarmac, Captain Greenwald leading. Cross walked among them. The huge metal doors slammed, and with a blast of Gargantuan flame, the Rocket heaved upward and vanished.

People cheered and laughed and cried.

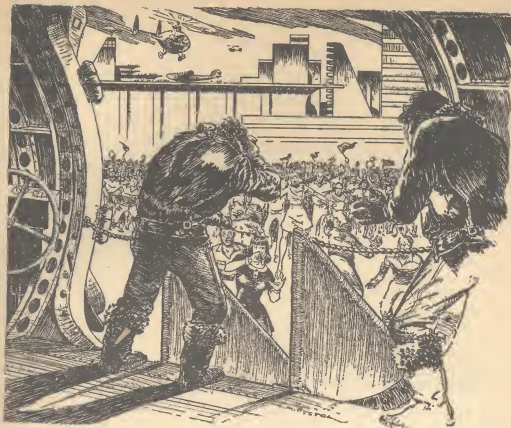
Stanley watched his son and daughter and mother-in-law do likewise. He was deeply pleased to see that Althea did not join them. Hand in hand they watched the sky dazzlement fade. The first Rocket to the moon was gone. The world was drunkenly happy in its delirium.

Two weeks passed slowly. Astronomers were unable to keep an eye on the Rocket. It was so small and unaccountable in the void between earth and lunar surface.

Stanley slept little in the passing of the fourteen days. He was constantly attacked by fears and confusions of thought. He dreamed of the Rocket going up. He had seen men month on month walking in the metal shadow of their wonderful Rocket, patting it with their greasy, calloused hands, loving it with their quick, appreciative eyes.

If for one moment you let yourself think of it, you loved it, too, for even though it symbolized wars and destruction, you had to admire its balance and slenderness of structure. With it, you could rub away the fog cosmetic of Venus, re-delinate its prehistorically shy face. And there was Mars, too. Man had been imprisoned a million years. Why not freedom now, at last?

Then he labeled all these fantasies by their correct name, ESCAPE, and settled back, to wait the return of the Rocket.



The crew of the Moon Rocket stood in the air-lock.

THE moon Rocket is returning! It will land this morning at nine o'clock!" Everybody's audio was blatting.

Like a yellow seed, the Rocket dropped down the sky, to sprout roots of flame on which to cushion itself. It fried the tarmac and a vast deluge of warm air rushed across the country for miles. People sweltered amidst a sudden rocket summer.

In his tower room, William Stanley watched, solemn and wordless.

The Rocket shimmered. Across the cooling tarmac, the crowd rioted, bursting through the barrier, sweeping the police aside in elation.

The tide halted and boiled and changed form, layer upon layer. A vast hush came upon it.

Now the round air-lock door of the Rocket jettied out air in a compressed sigh.

The thick door, sandwiched into the ship-hull, took two minutes to come out-

ward and pull aside on its oiled hingework. The crowd pressed closer, flesh to flesh, eyes widened. The door was now open completely. A great cheer went up. The crew of the Moon Rocket stood in the air-lock. The cheer faded, almost instantly.

The crew of the Rocket were not exactly standing. They were hunched over.

The captain stepped forward. Well, he didn't exactly *step*. He sort of dragged his feet and shambled. He made a speech.

But all it sounded like, coming from his twisted, swollen lips, was, "Uns—rrrr— oh — god — disss — ease — unh — rrr — nnn—"

He held out his grey-green fingers, raw, bleeding, for all to see. He lifted his face. Those red things, were they actually eyes? That depression, that fallen socket, had it been a nose? And where were the teeth in that gagging, hissing mouth? His hair

was thin and grey and infected. He stank.

The hypnotic silence was shattered. The first line of people turned and clawed at the second line. The second turned instinctively to claw the third, and so on. The television cameras caught it all.

Screams, yelling, shouting. Many fell and were trampled, crushed under. The captain and his crew came out, gesturing, calling them to come back. But who would heed their rotting movements? The ridiculous souvenir seekers trampled each other, ripping the clothes from one another's backs!

A souvenir? A scab of crawling flesh, a drop of yellow fluid from their gaping wounds? Souvenirs for earth, buy them right here, get them while they last! We mail anywhere in the United States!

The characters in order of appearance: The Captain, the astrogator, held sagging between two astronomers, who were followed by sixteen mathematicians, technicians, chemists, biologists, radio men, geographers and machinists. Shamble forth, gentlemen, and bring the brave new future with you!

The balloon vendor, in flight, jettisoned his entire stock. Rubber rockets floated wildly, crazily bobbling, bouncing the river of rioting heads until they were devoured, exploded and crumpled underfoot.

Sirens sounded. Police beetles rushed to the field exits. Ten minutes later the tarmac was empty. No sign of captain or crew. A few shreds of their fetid clothing were found, partially disintegrated. An audio-report five minutes later stated simply, "The captain and crew were destroyed on orders of the health bureau! An epidemic was feared—"

The sounds of riot faded. The door to Stanley's office opened, someone entered and stood behind him, and closed the door.

STANLEY did not turn from the window for a moment. "Fifty people injured, five of them critically. I'm sorry for that. But it was a small price for the world's security." He turned, slowly.

A horrible creature stood, diseased and swollen, before him. A captain's uniform, filthy and torn, hung tattered from the disgusting flesh. The creature opened its bleeding mouth.

"How was it?" asked the creature, muffledly.

"Fine," said Stanley. "Did you reach the moon?"

"Yes," replied the creature. "Captain Greenwald sends his regards to you. He says he knows we can do it again and again, any time we want, now, and that's all he wanted to know. He wishes you luck and tells you to go ahead. We landed the rocket on the way back from the moon, first of all, up at Fairbanks, Alaska, outside the settlement, naturally, during the night. Things worked as you planned them. We changed crews there. There was a minor fight. Simpson and the original crew, including Captain Greenwald, are still up there, under psycho-hypnosis. They'll live out their lives happily, unaware, with new names. They won't remember anything. We took off from Fairbanks again this morning with the new crew and our act all rehearsed, I think we did all right."

"Where's the substitute crew now?" inquired Stanley.

"Downstairs," said the creature. "Getting psychoed themselves. Getting mental blocs inserted, so they'll forget they ever fooled the world today. Then we'll send them back to their regular jobs. Can I use your shower?"

Stanley pressed a button, a panel slid aside. "Go ahead."

The creature pulled its face around the edges until it shed off into its hands, a green-grey pallid mask of plastic rubber. The sweating pink face of Cross appeared. He wriggled his fingers next, until the green-gray, chemically bleeding horror gloves sucked off. He tossed these into a wall-incinerator. "The day of the Rocket is over," he said, quietly. "They'll be putting your bill up before the World Legislature tomorrow, or I miss my guess. Carefulness, thought and intellect will now get a start. Humanity is saved from itself."

Stanley watched Cross walk into the shower-cube, peel, and switch on the spray.

He turned to the window again. Two billion people were thinking tonight. He knew what they were thinking. Outside, he heard the explosion as the health department blew up the great Rocket.

That was all. The sound of water on the shower-tiles was a good clean sound.



Realization of what was happening struck into Thettumir.

PLANET OF CREATION

By CHESTER S. GEIER

Illustrated by HARDISON

To these hardened spacemen, it was heaven. Bald rock sprouted grass, metal parts popped up as required, new men relieved the weary as soon as the need was merely thought of. Who could imagine there was a joker?

IN THE CONTROL ROOM was silence like fabric strained to the verge of tearing. Softly through the weave of it came the murmur of the engines, fretful, unhappy, the whimper of something sick.

The whimper echoed Thettumir's feelings. He gestured suddenly at the telescopic space scanner, the six snake-like digits of his hand stiff with dismay.

"But that is all? There are no other planets in this region?"

"None." Vandumonn shook for added emphasis the erect spiny crest which ran from the top of his head down the middle of his back. "I have made absolutely certain of that. This is the only planet. The next nearest sun is ten light-years away. But listen to the engines, Commander. I am an astronomer, not an engineer, yet I

know the engines will not take us that far. Even if they could, it would be a gamble as to whether or not that next nearest sun had planets."

Thettumir gazed once more at the magnified image in the scanner. It showed a great red sun, already well on its way toward cooling, and far off to the right, a silvery speck which was the only planet circling the dying giant. He reached for the dial which increased the magnification of the scanner and twirled it until the disc of the planet filled the entire screen.

The battered flagship had approached closer, but, as before, Thettumir was able to make out no details. The planet was covered with clouds—strange dense gray clouds. He knew the clouds indicated an atmosphere—perhaps even a breathable one—but his reluctance to accept the planet as a temporary repair base was due to the fact that the clouds would make landing extremely difficult. The Urgollian fleet was already badly damaged, and additional injuries would only complicate matters further.

Yet Thettumir knew they would have to land. The fleet would never reach Urgoll in its present condition. Many other vessels had suffered even greater damage than that to the flagship.

Thettumir turned from the scanner with sudden purpose. The assembled officers stiffened to attention.

"Forbidding as this cloud-covered world seems, it is our only hope for obtaining materials for repairs as well as suitable working conditions. Immediate orders shall be issued to the fleet to begin deceleration. We shall take an orbit about the planet in order K4. Scout ships are to be dispatched to descend and explore the surface. Further orders will be issued after the scout ships report. For the present, proceed as directed."

THETTUMIR turned and left the control room. The task of slowing their tremendous speed, he knew, would take time—time which he could spend most comfortably in his cabin. Besides, bitterness still gnawed within him at the recent Urgollian defeat by the men of Errth. Or was it Errth, he wondered. He could never remember the exact pronunciation. He'd have to ask Sthalor, the chief psychologist,

again. Sthalor had questioned enough captive Errthmen to be sure.

Questioned. Thettumir decided that was too nice a word. Sthalor's methods were apt to be harsh, but they produced vitally necessary information.

Striding through the corridors of the flagship, Thettumir thought wistfully of Errth. Of all the nine planets in the Solarian System, Errth had been the most desirable. A beautiful world, so much like Urgoll, and in many ways even superior. It would have made an ideal colonial addition, if—

If Urgoll had won, Thettumir thought with sudden pain.

He entered his cabin. Removing his flexible tinted metal uniform harness, he lowered his squat massive form gratefully into a chair. From a humidior on his desk he took a *nikot* leaf, which he rolled into a cylinder and inserted into a smoke-tube. He lit up, puffed away, felt the aching tension gradually leave him.

A knock at the door broke the *nikot*-scented quiet. It was Kasthel, second in command of the flagship.

"Forgive me if I intrude, Commander, but there is a matter of grave importance which I wish to discuss with you."

"Your visit is welcome, Kasthel." Thettumir gestured to a nearby chair and pushed within reach the *nikot* humidior. "What is this matter of grave importance?"

Kasthel did not look up as he filled his smoke-tube. "You recall the conditions that existed when we left Urgoll, Commander?"

Thettumir nodded slowly, his great yellow orbs clouding. "There was threat of revolution. Only the announcement that a habitable planet—Errth—had at last been discovered delayed it. And now, when we return—defeated..."

"Exactly," Kasthel affirmed. "Revolution will burst out abruptly and violently. With Errth lost to us, the population pressure on Urgoll will have no other outlet."

Thettumir curled his snake-like fingers into a fist and brought it down angrily on the desk. "It was the fault of the expedition which discovered Errth! It was careless enough to give warning of our existence. The Errthmen already had space

travel. When we finally came in force they were prepared."

"But a second attack, Commander. The Errthmen will not expect us to return."

"There will be no second attack. The revolution on Urgoll will bring on a dark age."

Kasthel leaned forward in sudden earnestness. "We could stop that. We compose the entire military strength of Urgoll. We are armed and trained. None could oppose us."

"But what good would it do?" Thettumir objected. "We would only keep in power an Executive Council which, if it had been more efficient and fore-sighted, would have controlled the spread of population in the beginning."

"Why share with the Executive Council what we have won by our own efforts?" Kasthel asked slyly.

For a moment Thettumir was puzzled. Then he smiled in sudden understanding. "I see what you mean. But, aside from taking over the rule of Urgoll, I see other things also. We could effect a temporary solution to the problem of over-population—by exterminating the weak and unfit. Then we could train all those remaining as soldiers, assemble the greatest fighting force that ever existed. Errth could yet be taken!"

Kasthel leaned closer. "But, Commander, are these things we could do, or will do?"

"Will do!" Thettumir snapped grimly, determinedly.

They interlocked digits in enthusiastic agreement. And then, over glasses of fiery *glath* liquor, they polished the rough jewel of their plans.

THE scout ships reported back. Gray clouds extended down to the very surface of the planet, but a landing would not be too difficult, since instruments showed the terrain to be dry and firm and free of irregularities. Gravity was slight, as the planet was a relatively small one. There was air—thin but breathable.

Thettumir gave orders for landing. Guided by their instruments and audio beams of the scout ships, the fleet settled slowly and gingerly to the surface. Repair crews began at once to remove damaged parts, while engineers and technicians began the design and manufacture of replace-

ments. The injuries sustained by the fleet, however, were so extensive that the stock of spare parts and materials was soon exhausted. Expeditions dispatched to locate deposits of the required metals reported failure. There were metals, but not enough or none at all of those which were most urgently needed.

Informed of the situation, Thettumir decided to make a personal tour of the fleet in the hope of finding some sort of solution. He had already the tentative idea of scrapping several vessels for the necessary materials, and intended by his survey to determine those most expendable. Accompanied by Kasthel and several other officers, he left the flagship.

Outside on the surface of the planet, he examined his surroundings curiously. There was disappointingly little to be seen. The ever-present gray clouds were thinner here than at higher altitudes, but the effect was that of a repressing fog in which visibility was limited to several yards. The ground was smooth bare rock, as colorless as the clouds. It was pleasantly warm, as might have been expected from the size and proximity of the sun. The air, though rarified, did not make breathing difficult.

Thettumir digested the result of his examination musingly. He told Kasthel, "This planet is not without merit. If it were not for the clouds and the barrenness of the soil, it would suffice as a colonial site."

Kasthel nodded. "Vegetation and an unobstructed view would make a great difference."

Thettumir gave an abrupt shrug. "We waste time in dreams. Come, we have still to make our inspection."

Guide lines had been strung from ship to ship. Following these, Thettumir and the others made their tour.

Thettumir was disheartened. The list of parts needed by each ship was so extensive that more than half the fleet would have had to be scrapped in order to supply the necessary replacements. He knew there would be insufficient room on the remaining vessels for the crews thus displaced. And because of the plans which he had made with Kasthel, Thettumir did not wish to abandon any of the men. Every fighter would be needed once they reached Urgoll.

It seemed to be checkmate. Trailed by the others, Thettumir glumly strode from the last vessel on his way back to the flagship. Half-way down the gang plank, he stopped abruptly, staring in amazed surprise. Gasps and cries from behind him showed that Kasthel and the rest had also seen.

The planet—or at least that portion of it in their immediate vicinity—had undergone a change. The gray fog had vanished. They gazed upon a gently rolling plain carpeted in green. Trees and shrubs in profusion broke the verdant expanse.



Thettumir frowned as he gazed at the scene. Something about it seemed to be wrong, but just what it was eluded him. He peered more closely—then he had it. The vegetation lacked detail. The grass was not composed of separate blades, but looked like a thick layer of rough green felt. The foliage of trees and shrubs appeared as though cut from green paper rather than being an aggregate of individual branches and leaves.

As Thettumir stared bewildered, the landscape seemed momentarily to blur, as though his eyes had gone out of focus. When he looked again, the strange lack of detail was no longer apparent. Everything was normal. The grass consisted of blades, the foliage of branches and leaves.

Thettumir swung around to Kasthel. "Did you notice it—the change just now?"

"Yes, Commander, and I think I know the explanation. What we saw at first was the result of some kind of atmospheric distortion. This distortion was removed a moment ago by a change in air currents."

"But the grass and trees," Thettumir said doubtfully. "They were not here when we began our tour."

Kasthel shrugged. "Hidden by the fog, perhaps. I'll have to admit that when I first saw the vegetation, it occurred to me that some omnipotent being overheard our remarks earlier and made them come true. But naturally there has to be a logical explanation."

"Naturally," Thettumir muttered. But he was disturbed. He remembered only too well that the ground had been smooth naked rock—and grass does not grow from rock.

Aboard the flagship, Thettumir found the men in a state of great excitement. Everyone seemed delighted with the change that had taken place outside. He reflected that it was good for morale and decided that if now they only had the materials for repairs things would almost be perfect.

THE buzzing of the inter-ship communication interrupted him as he filled his smoke-tube in his cabin. It was Rhondu, the chief engineer.

"Commander Thettumir, a crewman just found a supply of parts near No. 2 escape port. I've checked my list, and everything we need is there. May I ask where you obtained the parts?"

"Obtained . . ." Thettumir's voice failed him. He leaped from the cabin.

It was as Rhondu had said. Several yards from No. 2 escape port, Thettumir found a small gleaming hill of repair materials.

Re-entering the ship, Thettumir unleashed a torrent of questions. But, strangely enough, nobody knew where the parts had come from. To add to the confusion, calls by audio beam began coming from the other vessels of the fleet. Men from each had discovered further mounds of much-needed supplies.

Thettumir did not try immediately to explain this bewildering turn of events.

Like the leader he was, he gave orders that the mysterious supplies were at once to be used in completing repairs.

"This materialization of replacements is like a gift from the gods," Thettumir told Kasthel and Sthalor. "Wish I knew how to account for it."

"I've thought of mass hallucination," Sthalor said. "But . . . well, Rhondu showed me the stuff. It's real enough, all right."

Kasthel remained silent. He gazed through the cabin viewport at the rolling expanse of tree-dotted grass beyond, and his yellow orbs were clouded.

Thettumir said slowly, "Gift from the gods . . . I wonder, Sthalor, We took it for granted that this planet was uninhabited—but suppose it isn't? Suppose that there are creatures here, intelligent, invisible, possessed of such superhuman powers that they can create tangible objects from the nebulous stuff of our thoughts?"

Sthalor shrugged uneasily. "Who can say? This is a strange planet. Our standards of true and false, possible and impossible, do not apply here."

The inter-ship communicator buzzed. It was Rhondu again.

"Commander, I'm afraid we won't be able to use the parts after all. They don't fit. The specifications are all wrong. They look all right, but—" With a hastily muttered excuse, Rhondu broke off. A short time later his voice returned.

"I'm sorry, Commander, there must have been a mistake. My men just checked the parts again—and they're all right. It's very strange, though. Everything seemed to blur, and then . . . well, the parts were correct—down to the last detail."

Thettumir and Kasthel stared at each other. Kasthel said, "The grass . . . the trees . . ." Thettumir nodded somberly, his broad face tightening.

Within ensuing seconds, audio beam calls came from the other ships. Their engineers announced their replacements also to be incorrect specifications—only later puzzledly to contradict themselves. The repairs now went on without interruption.

Thettumir was thoughtful. If materials appeared from the very air merely by thinking about them, or wishing for them,

perhaps . . . He whirled abruptly to Kasthel and Sthalor.

"Look—consciously or unconsciously, we wished for those supplies. We got them. Now if we were to wish for other things—"

"Of course!" Sthalor exclaimed. "We should have thought of that before."

"Come, we will give it a test." Thettumir led the way hurriedly from the ship. Outside he said, "Now—what shall we wish for?"

"A weapon!" Kasthel said. "I've always wished we had several of those new Class IV atomic cannons. The Executive Council thought it would take too much time to make them."

Thettumir prompted, "But the specifications, Kasthel. Remember, you must know the exact specifications."

"I know them well, Commander." Kasthel closed his eyes, concentrating deeply.

Tense with eagerness, Thettumir watched. Suddenly, in a spot several feet to his right, a transparent angular outline appeared. It darkened, took on color and detail. And finally—there stood a Class IV atomic cannon. At the exclamations of Thettumir and Sthalor, Kasthel opened his eyes.

"It worked!" Thettumir exulted. "It worked!"

Kasthel's crest quivered with excitement. "Commander, if we can cause the materialization of objects like atomic cannon—"

Thettumir nodded quickly. "Then we can cause the materialization of objects like ships—the mightiest warships that ever blasted space!"

THETTUMIR got swiftly to work. He called a meeting of the various scientists and engineers of the fleet and explained his plans. After what had been experienced, none doubted that his idea was feasible. Designs and specifications were drawn up for an invincible battle cruiser, which, serving as a pattern, could be duplicated in countless numbers.

As the dreadnaughts began one by one to take form, a difficulty was encountered. It was realized that there wouldn't be enough men to run all the vessels. Thettumir overcame the difficulty with a solution which everyone else had overlooked

—duplicate the men until the desired number of additions had been obtained.

It was done. On that fantastic little world anything seemed possible. If the proper specifications and details were had, it seemed, anything might be wished for—and acquired.

At last everything was ready. Thettumir called Kasthel to his cabin. "Kasthel, we have now to make an important decision. We have the mightiest battle fleet in the history of Urgoll—in the history of any world, for that matter. Shall we continue on to Urgoll, or return to the Solarian System? I move that we return to the Solarian System. The Errthmen, though victorious, have been greatly weakened. They have not had time to recover, and with our present strength conquering them will be easy."

"I agree," Kasthel said. He grinned craftily. "The Executive Council will not run away, eh?"

Thettumir nodded his crest. "It will be there when we are ready for it. This is just the beginning, Kasthel. There are other inhabited worlds—and we will find them. With this planet to aid us in materializing ships and weapons, we can conquer the entire Universe!"

Many toasts or fiery *glath* were drunk to the decisions. Thettumir and Kasthel became quite drunk—and whether from *glath* or power, it was hard to tell.

The fleet began the long voyage back to the Solarian System. The crews were drilled repeatedly until they functioned as perfectly co-ordinated units. The old, now obsolete ships had been left behind and the Urgollians, both real and duplicate needed a shake-down cruise in their mighty new ships.

For Thettumir, however, there was little to do except to drink *glath*—which he did copiously and with relish. Each ship-day he impatiently counted off the miles which brought them closer to Errth.

Vandumonn finally made the long-awaited announcement that the Solarian System was in sight. Thettumir hurried to the control room, where he peered eagerly into the telescopic scanner. There was the familiar yellow sun, magnified to a tiny disc, though they were still far away. And by straining intently, Thet-

tumir could discern two of its nine planets.

Elation filled him at the thought of his coming triumph. Already he was envisioning himself as master of Errth.

Closer and closer, ship-day by ship-day, hour by hour, the yellow sun became a fiery star, visible to the naked eye.

Thettumir's impatience grew. "It seems impossible to wait until we reach Errth," he told Kasthel. "I want to see the Errthmen pay for what they did to us the first time we came."

Kasthel chuckled. "Revenge will be sweet, Commander."

The inter-ship communicator buzzed. The voice of Nurrigan, a junior officer, blared abruptly from the speaker.

"Commander, something is terribly wrong! Half the fleet has disappeared!"

Thettumir stiffened, congealed by an overwhelming dismay. "You must be mad!" he snapped finally at Nurrigan.

"It's true, Commander, horribly true. Come and see for yourself."

Thettumir roused into action. With Kasthel close at his heels, he dashed to the control room. A glance into the scanner verified Nurrigan's words. Half of the fleet was gone! As Thettumir stared, he saw a nearby vessel puff abruptly into nothingness. Some of its crew, however, remained. He saw their strewn figures for a moment—before they exploded in the vacuum of space.

A second vessel went. A third.

Realization of what was happening struck into Thettumir stunningly. He whirled to Kasthel.

"We were fools—fools! Our fine new fleet was the result of materialized thought. We should have known that these materializations could no longer exist once we went beyond the field of influence of the forces that created them and held them together."

"We've got to stop!" Kasthel gasped. "We've got to turn back!"

Thettumir shook his crest sadly. "Our inertia is too great to overcome quickly. Before we could decelerate, we would already be far over the danger line. No, Kasthel, let us go instead to my cabin and have a last drink of *glath*."

They never reached the cabin.



In the crimson glare, Flane's sword sang a strident song as it slithered around steel and drank from the heart of men.



SWORD OF THE SEVEN SUNS

By GARDNER F. FOX

Their world was dark. Their Machine-God was dead. Savage hordes threatened to overrun them, smash them. What, then, was Flane doing out in the desert, alone with the wreck of a space-ship—and a strangely-wrought sword?

THE SPACE-SHIP fled like a silver bullet across black nothingness.

Rows of round windows stared outward from its curved sides. Beyond the windows whirled clouds of interstellar dust. An occasional lump of meteoric rock rebounded from the metal hull.

To port shone the triple stars of a constellation utterly foreign to those in the ship. To starboard gleamed the strangely altered pattern of the constellation Hercules. Straight ahead lay the great star Deneb, and circling around it, giant orbs

shimmering in its light, were the planets it held in its awful grip.

Closer and closer swept the ship, trailing billows of spacedust. Over one of the planets that closely resembled the voyager's home planet in size and density, the vessel thundered. It rocketed downward, sweeping sidewise into the gravitational pull of the planet. It dropped into swirling clouds, swept into sunlit sky, roaring gustily.

Inside the ship a voice cried hysterically, "Calling captain! Calling captain!"

"Captain responding. Over to forward jet ports."

"The forward jets are shot, sir! Unused for too long. Ever since we left Earth, they've remained untested. Can't fix them now. No time. Inside gravity of planet. Over."

THE MAN in the captain's uniform bowed his head, eyes tightly shut. There was bitterness in his heart, but no despair. Six hundred light years from Earth, farther out among the stars than any man had ever trespassed, and now, this! A hand squeezed his shoulder. He glanced up, found the blue eyes of his wife smiling at him, heard her voice whisper, "At least we'll go together, darling."

He patted her hand.

Through the compressed quartz panels they stared at the world unfolding beneath them. Rolling plains covered with long grasses that swayed gracefully before the wind bordered high, black mountains that cupped mounds of snow at their peaks. In the distance was the blue of a sea.

"A lovely world," he whispered.

"You were right, Jon. Your calculations proved the habitability of Deneb's planets. You would have been famous."

He chuckled, "This is one consolation, darling. But I'd hoped for so much more than that . . . a land to bring the restless spirits, where they could dwell apart from the regimented ones, to form a new country to call their own . . ."

He broke off. The ship was quivering, shuddering in the mad pace of its unchecked flight. Thunder rolled like monumental cannonfire behind it, as the air was displaced and rolled together.

The captain worked the controls feverishly. His hands sought by their swiftness, by their strength, to fire those frontal jets, to stop this deadly dash through planetary atmosphere. He bit his lips and shook his head, whispering, "No use—no use!"

There was desert under the silvered belly of the ship. Heat waves glimmered up from the hot sands, distorting everything. Far in the distance lay a round yellow thing. The spaceship headed toward it, as though at the bullseye of a target.

"We're going to hit it," said the man.

"What is it, Jon?"

Yellow and glittering, it lay like a giant's plaything, half buried in the sand. It was a prism with clean, straight facets fitted together that seemed to stretch out at every angle to gather in the heat from the desert. Like a yellow diamond, it coruscated in the sunlight.

"I don't know," the man said softly. "It could be something that dropped from the skies to bury itself in this spot, or it could be the—the work of intelligent creatures!"

Their trajectory of flight shortened. The nose of the ship fell lower, aimed at the prism. The noise of its passage startled two white birds that ran on the sand. The birds ran faster, blurring along on the amber desert.

From behind the amber prism a two-legged thing came running. In his hand there was a flash and glitter.

"It's a man!" the woman shrieked, a red-nailed hand to her lips. "And he has a sword in his hand."

"Poor devil," sighed the captain. "We're heading right at him. He can't get away."

The ship came down with unbelievable rapidity. The man on the sand had taken only a few steps from the prism when a black shadow overhauled him. He had no time even to turn his head.

There was an explosion that ripped metal apart, that tore gaping holes in the smooth facets of the golden prism, that sent geysers of desert sand upward in dry, showers. When the sands came down, there was only scattered wreckage.

Like a twisted, broken toy, the spaceship lay on the sand, partially obscuring the prism. Gaunt girders stuck up through the opened hull. Smoke swirling from the ship's insides mixed with the falling sand.

Somewhere in the wreckage, a voice wailed in agony and despair.

I

THE MACHINE stood in the domed end of the dark temple, gleaming dully. Above it a hemisphere of translucent metal filtered pale moonbeams that drew flashes of silvered fire from the great metal bulk. Against the black basalt walls, the Machine brooded sullenly. It was great, was the Machine. It was worshipped. It held power of life and death

over all Klarn. It possessed all power. It was god.

And yet, the Machine was—dead.

A figure slipped forward from the shadows that ringed the marble floor. From pillar to ivory pillar he crept, a hand ever on the stained leather hilt of his sword. Moonlight flicked over the close-cropped black hair and the tight uniform of the *dulars* that moulded his chest, and sheathed his long, lean thighs. Emblazoned on the chest of his jacket was the resurgent red dragon with fire spouting between its fangs, symbolic of his rank. A broad belt suspended his scabbard and blade, and sweeping upward from his shoulders were the metal epaulettes that bespoke his connection with royalty.

Flane looked around him, grinning.

He had eluded the *mekniks*. He could keep his appointment with Vawdar, unless the *mekniks* got to him first. Most of the *mekniks* were celebrating the death of his mother, the Princess Gleya. There would be rich liqueurs and much singing, and temple harlots to dance on the planked tabletops, sodden with the lees of spilled wine.

Flane was bitter, and savage. There was a fire in his heart that made him lust to kill. The *mekniks* were glad that his mother was dead, for she was all that held the *mekniks* and the *dulars* together. Now the *mekniks* would rule Klarn, with the aid of the Darksiders. Only Vawdar had a chance of keeping peace among the factions. And Vawdar was a hunted man, even as was Flane.

He came and knelt before the Machine, and touched his forehead to the cold marble floor. This was the ritual insisted upon by the *mekniks*, who insisted that the Machine was a deity, and there was enough shrewd caution in Flane to bow before it, just on the off chance that they might be right.

Then he rose and went to the grilled metal girdle that kept the Machine enclosed in its niche. He took out a strangely wrought key and dangled it in his hand.

Engraven on the sides of the Machine were a series of symbols. Diamond-shaped, they were, with the tracery of a star surrounding each diamond. One of those diamonds was the lock that would restore to life the dead Machine. Flane hoped that the key he held would unlock the

slumbering power of the Machine. If not—well, Vawdar and he were as good as dead, themselves.

He inserted the key in the slit-like hole of one of the diamonds and tried to turn it.

He whispered curses, attempting to move the key by sheer force.

Another failure, he thought bitterly. Just one of the hundreds that had failed since that day, over a quarter of a century ago, when the Machine had hummed madly, and stopped. Those others had not mattered; every *dular* and *meknik* who thought he knew the answer had tried it. There was no penalty for failure. But now, with the *mekniks* hot after Vawdar who might still hold *mekniks* and *dulars* together, failure meant death if they should catch him.

Flane ran his fingers over the tiny hole. He saw the star pattern bordering the lock, like a frieze ornamenting it. He sighed. All the diamonds had holes.

Sound came to him as he stood before the machine, in the light of Klarn's three moons seeping in from the dome. He whirled, and half-drew his sword. Voices floated to him, riotous with laughter and derision.

"Vawdar! They got him at last. As he was trying to get out the Dragon Gate."

"Good news. Now if we could get the Princess' whelp, Flane!"

The man in the shadows showed his white teeth in a silent snarl of pure hate. His knuckles tensed on the sword-hilt until they threatened to burst the tightened skin.

"The *dulars* would be leaderless, then. They'd have to obey us, or we'd pull in the Darksiders—let them loot!"

One of the men grumbled, "If we have Vawdar, what use for us to miss the celebration? Why stand guard at the Temple here?"

"The council thinks Flane might try once more to make the Machine work. If he succeeded—well, that would mean that Klarn will spring to life. The Darksiders, though they outnumber us all, will never dare attack. They remember too well the weapons of the Klarnva."

Flane stirred himself, stepped forward into the shadows, stalking toward the temple entrance where the guards talked.

There were only two of them, and Flane had a great deal of confidence in his sword-arm, confidence that had been justified again and again.

He leaped from the darkness, his blade a thing of lightning in his hand. The guards came around on their heels, yanking out their weapons, laughing gutturally.

"Flane! We have him, too!" rasped one of them.

"Pig bird!" whispered Flane.

His blade drove in like a beam of light, twirled the blade of the nearest guard in a circular envelopment, wresting it from his fingers to send it flashing high in the air. Sidestepping the lunge of the other guard, Flane slithered his blade through his opponent's neck, watched him gargle blood in his throat as he plunged.

In a moment the second guard lay beside his fellows, lifeless. Flane stepped across their still legs, out into the cool night air. Above his head the three moons of Klarn whirled high in the heavens, flooding the court with light.

"The Dragon Gate," Flane whispered, and ran.

AS HIS FEET pounded on back streets and alleys, he dwelt on the threat of the Darksiders. They were like the Klarn, yet they possessed none of their scientific ability. Centuries ago, so many that the Klarnva had lost count of them, the Darksiders ruled all of Klarn. Then had come the Klarnva, who consisted of the *dulars* and the *mekniks*, in ships of the sky, from somewhere beyond the triple moons of Klarn. From where, had been lost in the shrouding veils of antiquity.

Their leader had been Norda, a thin genius with a mind as curious as a question. It was Norda who put the machine together, who directed that the people should live in walled city-states against the inroads of the vast numbers of barbaric Darksiders. In the machine Norda had stored power, endless quanta of it. That power gave the Klarnva their lights, their heat, their luxuries. They grew used to it. The Machine even furnished them with weapons, so far superior to those of the Darksiders that the latter looked on them with awe.

When the Machine went dead twenty-five years ago, the city-states of the

Klarnva went dead, too. There was no light, no heat. Gone were the power-driven vehicles, the entertaining-screens. People groped upward as from a fog, seeking the source of that power. They recalled that the Keeper of the Machine had disappeared around the same time as the Machine stopped. Moreover, the vast prism in the desert was smashed. Something from outer space had crushed it.

All knew that there was a key to the Machine that would start it into motion. Many of them had tried to move it, from the Princess Gleya down to Flane. None of them were successful.

"Neither was Vawdar," grated Flane, racing beneath a balcony, skidding on restless feet around a corner.

There was clamour ahead of him. Hearing the hoarse cries of men fighting, the rasp of blades meeting and falling away, Flane went forward like the arrow from the bow. His blade was naked in the night, a length of glittering steel. He could see the Dragon Gates now: tall red blocks of stone hewn into the royal emblem of Klarn, red dragons, with real flame spurt-ing from between their teeth to light the gateway below.

In the crimson glare, men struggled. As Flane shot into the mass of men, he saw Vawdar, bound at wrist and ankle, leaning against the wall of a building.

"For Gleya!" snarled Flane, and ran his blade through a *meknik's* heart.

Now the hands of men were all around him, and their shoulders, smelly with sweat. He heard curses rasped in his ears, caught the glitter of a dagger raised to smite. Flane went in low on steel-thewed legs, lurched a shoulder to catch a *meknik* off balance and send him reeling into others with the keen edge of Flane's sword across his throat, severing his jugular vein.

The sword in his hand sang a strident song as it slithered around steel and drank from the heart of men. The blade danced and leaped. The best steel in Klarn was in that sword, and the finest hand for a hilt was wielding it. The *mekniks* gave stubbornly, but the dripping point that sprang out of the night for throat and chest would not be denied.

Flane sliced a dagger across Vawdar's bonds, heard his swift, "They fight with

strangers whom I do not know. Be swift, Flane, that we may escape!"

For the first time, the swordsman beheld his allies. They were Klarnva, all of them; muffled in long black cloaks from which only their arms that held their blades appeared. Klarnva, but unfamiliar to him.

In the press of battle, groups of cursing, fighting men swirled around Flane and Vawdar as they sought to back away. Five *mekniks* glimpsed his lean face beneath the black hair and howled, "Flane! Flane!" to the starry, three-mooned sky.

Now the *dular* fought for his life. With his spine to a wooden door, he snarled softly, green eyes following the points that faced him, his longsword alive to each thrust. Parry, lunge, recover. Riposte and thrust. He fought five men in that doorway, and one stepped out untouched. Over five fallen bodies the swordsman leaped, to keep death from the throat of Vawdar.

The black-cloaked men reformed their ranks, swept around them as a shield. There was one of them who did not fight, who stood, still and silent, looking on. Flane went for him, crying, "Who are you? Why do you make our fight your fight?"

THE ARM he held in his powerful hand was soft and slender. The hood fell back, and in the moonlight Flane gazed into a white face in which red-brown eyes stared back at him. Massy coils of red hair that blew in the breeze came loose, and flicked across his face. He breathed in the faint perfume of the girl, and looked at her full, red mouth.

All red, she seemed, and the smooth sheen of her skin was like the satin-stuffs that came from distant Yeelya. Flane grinned at her.

"Girl," he whispered, "you walk with death tonight!" and drew her with him out of the path of a thrown knife that clanked against a brick wall behind where they stood.

"Fall back!" a tall stranger cried to him, and Flane drew the girl and Vawdar with him into an alleyway.

"We have mounts beyond the Dragon Gate," she said hurriedly, stumbling along. "We came for Vawdar, knowing the rebellion that threatens his life."

Flane turned to Vawdar, seeing his face

redde in the crimson light of the flambeau inset in the wall overhead.

"The key you gave me," he said hurriedly. "It didn't work."

"I know. I've learned the real key in the meantime—"

The girl whispered swiftly, "Can you use it? Turn the machine on tonight? That's why we came, knowing that any hope of using the machine depends on you, Vawdar!"

The man shook his head. A laugh sat in his throat, almost evil in his bitterness. Against the background of clashing blades and grated oaths, and the rasping breathing of men fighting in the street, it was hollow in despair.

"Tonight? No. And not for many nights after this, and perhaps never. Because, you see—"

A shout hurtled upwards from the throat of a man who was turning into their alley. Men raced behind him, shouting. With his naked left arm, Flane swept the girl behind him, grinning, whispering. "Now they've caught us. Between two gangs, in this alley."

"Can't we reach that gate with the dragons?" said the girl. "We have *megathons* stallions waiting there. We could go across the desert together, all of us—"

Flane disengaged his blade from the sword of the first *meknik*, and lunged beneath his guard. As the man fell, Flane shoved him back into the others, working his blade, butchering calmly. In the closeness of the mob who rushed him, there was no room for finesse. He shortened his blade, and stabbed.

"*Megathons*," Flane whispered to the night. "They are native to the southern regions. One-horned horses."

There was only one city-state of the Klarnva in the south: Moornal. Yet Moornal was remote from Klarn; so remote that, since the Machine went dead, it was looked upon almost as a myth.

"Yes," said the girl in answer to Flane's quick questions. "From Moornal. We, too, have felt the bite of want without the Machine to feed us. We are desperate."

The last man fell in front of Flane. He whirled and raced toward the blue-coated men who were fighting at the alley's entrance.

"To the gate!" he shouted, and broke

the ring of *mekniks* and was in the clear, his redly-dripping blade like the darting tongue of a swamp-snake.

Flane fought like a man gone mad. His feet danced the *incartata*, even as his bare left hand swept aside point and blade; with lunge and *caricado* he played his blade in the torchlight, engaging the *mekniks*. They cursed, but in their breath was the fright of grim death. These men had seen Flane fight before; they knew his reputation, and the magnificent steel of his sword. They broke slowly, but when they finally did, they ran.

The girl was staring at Flane with dark moons for eyes, standing solitary under the stone lintel of the gate. He shot toward her, put out an arm and swept her up against him, racing beyond the gate.

The hooves of the *megathons* were stamping on the stone causeway as they came into the open. Flane saw Vawdar already high in an ornate saddle, gesturing. A horse reared against a moon, fore-hooves pawing wildly. A Moornalian shouted something, swinging his mount's head toward the gate.

But Flane only saw and heard these things dimly. For the girl that was in the crook of his arm, pressed soft against him, was working a strange magic on him. He saw her face framed by the wild red hair, and the dark, mysterious eyes, and the generous mouth. Under moonlight she was enchantment come to life.

He bent and kissed her.

Dimly, he realized that he was mad to stand kissing this girl while men shouted and horses whinnied, but he put the thought from him.

The storm broke, then.

There were men with swords all around them, shouting triumph. Shoulders bumped them, drove them against a horse. Flane heard Vawdar yell, saw him bend from the saddle and stretch an arm toward them.

"I tried to warn you. The *mekniks* have come in force. Man, move yourself!"

Flane threw the girl high in the air, across a saddle. With the flat of his hand, he slapped the rump of the plunging *megathon*. Then Flane was leaping, grasping reins with sure hands, his foot feeling for the carven stirrup.

"We'll divide," Flane yelled to a Moor-

nalian." The *mekniks* want us most of all!"

They were off in a clatter of hooves striking sparks from the cobblestoned driveway, leaning forward over the necks of the *megathons*, reins loose. Flane looked at Vawdar, positive that he grunted, but Vawdar waved a hand, and they went on.

For once in his life, Flane was glad that the Machine was dead. If it were alive, the *mekniks* could have swept their group with guns that would have turned them into drifting powder. But now only a few arrows fell and bounced on the stones behind them.

They were going away from the Moornalians now. Flane saw them, bobbing shadows moving into the night. He flung up an arm, and waved. There was red hair blowing free in the wind, over there, and Flane felt as though he watched his life ebbing from him, staring across at her.

The *megathons* were swift. Flane thought with surprise that they were even faster than the horses of the Klarn. Then he saw the thin horn protruding up from the forehead of the beast. It was filed to a fine point, and coated with metal. He grinned. This was a fighting *megathon*, spawned and bred for a special job. He gave the animal its head, and let him run into the night.

AFTER many hours, Flane became aware that Vawdar rode too silently. He himself was full of the flame of the red-haired girl, but Vawdar should be talking, revealing the secret of the key to the Machine.

He turned—and then cursed softly.

Vawdar lay across the neck of his mount. In the moons' light, Flane could see the haft of a dagger distending from the middle of his back. Up and down he bobbed, arms interwoven with the reins to prevent his falling.

With gentle hands Flane drew him down; made him easy on the sands, with cloak at his neck, and a flagon of wine at his lips.

Vawdar whispered, "They got me in front of the gate, just as we were clearing them. Someone threw a dagger."

Flane was bitter. "My fault. Fool, fool! Forgive me Vawdar!"

The older man chuckled softly, "It is

good for Klarn that there is one man who can stop to kiss a wench when men are dying all around him. It bodes high hope for the future, Flane."

But the dark-haired youth would not be soothed. He said things about himself until Vawdar writhed suddenly on the ground, back arched.

"I haven't—much time," the man on the sand whispered.

Flane bent, ear to his mouth.

"The key of the Machine. it—it isn't what—we think. It—"

Flane held his breath, staring at the closed eyes. The thought came to him that this man lying so still and silent on the desert at his knees was the last hope of the Klarnva. If he dies without speaking, the Machine will never work. And if the Machine does not work, then the Dark-siders will overrun the city-states of the Klarn. The *mekniks* may call them in to fight the *dulars*, and that will hasten their coming; but come they will, some day. For the Klarnva were sliding back to their level, swiftly, without the Machine. There would be no rays to wipe out hordes at one swipe. Instead, there must be arrow to meet arrow, and sword for sword; and there were few of the Klarnva who could match the Darksidars with these weapons!

He moved Vawdar with an arm under his shoulder, staring at the pallid face. "Vawdar! Speak to me!"

The man moved his head from side to side. His eyes opened, staring. They focused, after a moment. "The prophecy, Flane. The prophecy—"

Flane scowled. Prophecy? He knew no prophecy. Yet wait—

There *was* something Crazy words about a man who would come with stars in his hands, who would unite all Klarn, *dulars* and *mekniks* and Darksidars alike, who would bring them the blessings of the Machine, and lead them to greatness. But such a man must be a giant. Stars in his hands! Flane grunted disbelief.

There came to Vawdar that false strength that some experience before death. He said strongly, "The key is lost, Flane. It may never be found. In certain records that your moth—the Princess Gleya, rather—kept, there was mention of it. She never knew, apparently. When the

Keeper disappeared so long ago, he had the key with him.

"If you can find the Keeper, he will have the key. Search, Flane, Search!"

The man stiffened, opened his mouth wide for air.

Flane said softly, "But what is the key like? Is it big? Small? Is—"

Flane opened his eyes wide and put out a hand. The flesh he touched was yet warm, but—

He sat on his haunches for long minutes, numb. The key was gone now. Only Vawdar knew what it was like, and he could never tell.

Flane buried him beneath a hillock of sand, with flat stones from a small mesa to mark the spot. Weary, Flane stood and stared at the grave, quiet with grief. He had buried the hope of all Klarn here in this lonely spot. Without Vawdar, the Klarnva were a lost race.

Light glimmered on the horizon. Flane stared at it uncomprehendingly, a still, lean figure leaning on a sword.

II

FOR MANY DAYS, Flane rode across the desert. This was the Barrenland out here, uncharted, unexplored. For a thousand miles, the dun sands flung their sheathing blanket over the earth. Only here and there was anything other than this deadly sand: a rocky escarpment, or a stone plateau with dry weeds blowing in the breeze. And the rock was as dead as the sand.

A man could die easily out here, from thirst or hunger, or the terrible heat. When he was two days on an aimless trail, Flane found water bubbling under a lip of rock; that gave him strength to run down a sand-hare and spit it with his blade. After that it was much the same, for the hares abounded, and there was always Flane's deep spring.

The *megathon* ate the sparse weeds, and thrived. Flane shared the cool water with him, and rubbed him down nightly after stripping off the ornate saddle and blanket. Together, they roved the Barrenland, always learning. Affection born of the great still places of a world grew between them, as it will wherever there are planets that bear diverse forms of life.

On the roan's back, Flane ranged far and wide. He came to know the vermilion sunset coating the sand in blood and the sunrise tinting it with gold. In the saddle he stared at strange ruins poking above the hiding sands, puzzled and wondering. He discovered olden roads beneath scudding dust, and queer little beasts who scampered from his shining sword.

Mount and rider grew lean and hard. Flane lost track of the days, being too concerned with keeping soul fastened to his body to care much about anything else; though often he sat and brooded on the lost key to the Machine.

And over the fires that he made from weed-roots at the entrance to his little cave, he thought of the girl with the flaming hair. Her features nestled there amid the darting flames, eyes wide and searching as they met his, her mouth seeming to yearn toward him. Occasionally he would bury his face in his hands, and shudder.

Then came the morning when he filled his flagons with springwater, and walked toward the roan *megathon*. Holding the beast's head on his shoulder, he stroked the satiny jaw and pulled the short ears.

"We rot here, Saarl," he whispered, looking out across the desert. "We could die as well by riding forward to seek our fate."

The *megathon* tossed its shapely head and whinnied.

Flane grinned and hit his heavily muscled shoulder lightly. He threw blanket and saddle on him, and buckled the cinch. Swinging upward, he kicked a heel into Saarl's ribs.

Flane found the going not too difficult. The months they had spent at the cave injured them to the mad sun, and to little water. And Flane already knew the signs that meant the sand-hares were about. They rode on and on, into the sea of sand, week after week.

It was the stallion that first sensed the thing in the distance. He stood with nostrils flaring, head up, looking to the west. Flane rose in his stirrups, staring. There was something yellow and sparkling there, with something else twisted and caught around it.

"Let's go see, Saarl," he whispered, and let the roan run.

They circled the spaceship warily, the

megathon stepping on dainty hooves, alert to fly. Flane had a hand on his sword hilt, but when his eyes beheld the evidence of years that had dwelt here a while and gone away, he relaxed.

When they were closer to the ship, Flane saw the gigantic prism, and awareness came upon him.

"It's the Great Prism," he told the animal, in awe. "We always thought it half a legend, though the Princess assured me that it was real. But, without the Machine, there were none who dared to seek it, for only a few knew the way that led here."

FLANE walked on foot around it. Built of sheets of glass, fitted and joined together with the cunning of a master scientist, it glowed like amber fire in the blaze of the sun. Though it nearly blinded him, Flane went nearer and stared down through the sheets of glass, into the interior. He saw great whitish globes standing on coiled springs, and where the whiteness was, was a glowing fire that looked like the heart of the sun.

Flane rubbed his eyeballs, turning away.

The rusted hull of the spaceship lured him. His gaze found a burst-open section and he peered within. Backing out, he stared from prism to ship, and back again.

"This fell from the sky," he mused, in the manner of men long used to their own company. "It broke the prism, and—"

Flane gasped.

Could it be that this had something to do with the stopping of the Machine? But no, no. In that event, there would be no need for a key to operate the Machine. Yet deep inside him, Flane thought that this tragedy might have to blame itself for what had happened to the Klarnva. Somehow, at least.

Nimble he went inside the ship and walked its metal floor. Here was wonder, piled upon wonder. This vessel was a city-state all by itself. In the domed ceilings were lights, and in the rooms he passed were machines, many and varied, strange. The lights and the machines were dead. Had they been alive, it would have been even more miraculous to Flane, for he had been brought up in a world where everything that moved by motor depended upon the Machine. Curious, he went and

ran his hands over the smooth sides of the things he saw.

Do they, too, lie quiet because the Machine is dead? he puzzled. Yet this thing that must have come out of the sky in this deserted place was not like the magnificences that the Klarnva had. It could not depend on the Machine. No. It must have power of its own.

Elated, he ran from chamber to chamber, until he stood in a small room with compressed quartz for windows. Dust was piled thickly on floor and bench, and there were two queerly human heaps of dust sprawled on the floor. Flane felt that he stood in the presence of a very great sorrow.

Childlike, he searched throughout the ship. In a drawer he found pictures on paper, pictures far more lifelike than the paintings that hung in the Museum of Art back in Klarn. He held the photographs to the light, and gasped.

He was in that picture!

Flane felt faint, staring at himself. It was he, it was. The tall man, lean and dark, with black hair was Flane. He was not mistaken. But the garments the man wore were so odd! And the woman beside him, with the tiny baby in her arms—Flane was positive he did not know her.

Flane sat down to riddle himself the question.

He remembered now that all his life he had been a little different from the Klarnva. Where they were dull and apathetic, he was bursting with vigour. Curious he had ever been, to the dismay of the Princess Gleya. Often he was wont to take apart the various machines that the Klarnva owned; dead machines they were, but exasperating to Flane, who wondered why they did not work. In those days, he had not understood about the Machine. He recalled now that Vawdar had said once to the Princess, "It is his heritage. The space-wanderers' blood is in his veins." That used to fret him, but now—

Now he understood. That man was his father, and that woman, his true mother. The hate of the Klarnva for him, that expressed itself when the *mekniks* spoke of him among themselves, was explained. He was brood of those who had smashed the prism. And, possibly, the Machine. They beheld Flane, a living monument to

The Catastrophe, always before their eyes. Flane chuckled, understanding.

He stood up. If these were his people, then he was home. And, if this were his home, he should know all he could of it.

His search of the ship was thorough, and it took five days. Some of that time he spent in the saddle, for he had to eat, and there was always the problem of water. On the third day he solved that problem. He discovered hermetically-sealed tanks deep in the bowels of the ship, and when he learned that they held water, his respect for his race zoomed skyward. The water was warm, but it was pure.

At last he chanced upon a room that was filled with fascination. From floor to ceiling, it housed machines. He spent hours over them, pondering. They were different from the machines of the Klarnva, for all of their machines had tiny globes atop them. These had no globes. They had wires connecting them to the walls. Eventually he realized that their sources of power were dissimilar.

If only he could learn the power of these people! The thought buoyed him like a drug. After two days spent in the room, he was dispirited. Whatever power the space-wanderers used was as dead as the Machine.

Flane swore and heaved a wrench at a wall.

The wall opened.

Something tumbled out, and from the mouth of it a purple flame sizzled and burned, and ate away the wall and the wall beyond that.

Flane yelped and sprang. He stared in numb horror until he saw the button on the thing, a button as obvious as a trigger. He crept close, pressed it, and the violet flame stopped.

Flane shook for minutes, kneeling on the metal floor with the deadly thing in his hands.

HE KNEW nothing of atomic power, did Flane, but the quick mind of him was alert to the power he held in his palms. Tentatively he pressed the button again, directed the lavender fire, watched it eat up whatever stood in its path.

"This is a weapon that is a weapon," he breathed, patting its shining sides, his

eyes dancing. With this in his hands, he could remake a world.

Where the violet flame had been was an empty hole. Flane stared into it, seeing twisted girders and gaping hullsides, and black sands below. That was the desert, down there, and—

Something gleamed whitely beneath him. Stretching far out, he scrutinized it. A skeleton lay there, blasted into fragments, scattered apart. At one time that had been a man. From his position, Flane thought that the spaceship must have killed him; caught him on the sands, and crushed him, throwing his body.

Something else shone and glittered down in the sands. Something long and bright, and with darkness at one end, although that darkness glittered.

Flane gasped, "A sword!"

He dropped from girder to girder until he stood in the darkness, bending and lifting the thing. In his hand the blade made a singing play, humming vibrantly. The blade was coated with runes, and figures carved in a delicate frieze in the steel. A craftsman had made that blade, ornamenting it without weakening it. With a big hand on the hilt, Flane danced it before him.

The hilt was a dark blue, like a midnight sky. Set inside the translucent, crystalline stuff were seven tiny globules of light that glittered eerily. Five of them formed a star at the guard, and the other two were embedded in the pronged pommel. They made a queer design, and reminded Flane of a constellation he could see at night from Klarn.

Saarl whinnied alarm somewhere outside.

Flane sprang for the girders, sword in belt. He went up the twisted steel, hand over hand, and ran for the opening in the hull, snatching up the flame-weapon as he ran.

A magniship was coming from the south.

The only known mechanism that did not need the Machine to function was the magniship. It, too, was a discovery of the ancient genius, Norda. It utilized the polar magnetism that held the planet in its grip; the red balls that endlessly circled the rim of the ship drew on that stream of magnetism for its power, sent it toward

the motors deep in the hull which whirled the propellers.

Flane tightened his hands on the gun and waited, watching through thin-slitted eyes as the ship altered course, observing the great wreck. He thought, *with this in my hands, I could destroy that ship.* The knowledge made him feel like a god.

Saarl nuzzled his back as he stood on the sand, watching men walk toward him.

"Are you suspicious, too, Saarl?" he whispered. "We are alone, you and I. The Klarnva ran us out of Klarn, and there are no others that we know. It is best to be careful."

He threw up a palm, calling out, "Stand where you are. You can come no closer."

A tall man threw back the hood of his cloak and scowled at him.

"You talk big for a man who dwells in a ruined house."

Flane spat, saying, "This is no house, fool. It is a ship that came from the sky. I talk big because I am big. I bear death in my palms."

The tall man looked interested. Flane saw him study the gun, then look toward the prism and the ship twisted around it. The man looked back at him.

"I would search your house, or ship, or whatever it is."

Flane shook his head.

"Step no closer or the colour that sizzles and eats everything in its path will come out to sear you."

The thin man beckoned and the men with him shed their black cloaks and came for Flane with naked swords in their hands. Flane grinned as they ran toward him. He lifted the gun and aimed it at the cloaks that lay on the sand.

The violet light came forth from the gun and stole all around the black cloaks that lay on the sand, and ate them up. It ate up some of the sand, too.

THE MEN skidded to a halt in the sand, staring; beneath their white faces was the pallor of fear. Flane said softly, "Go back to your ship and be grateful to Flane. If I had wanted, I could have aimed the gun at you."

The tall man started; he stared at Flane with his dark eyes, as though absorbing his every feature.

He said, "Are you Flane in truth? The

Flane who fled from Klarn with Vawdar?"

"I am that Flane."

"And Vawdar? What of him? Did he give you the key to the Machine?"

"Vawdar died. He said the key was lost, which we knew; but he also said it was not what we think it is, that key."

"I am searching for that key, even now. If I do not find it, the Darksiders will overrun Moornal. I am overlord of Moornal. My name is Harth."

A flame leaped inside Flane, for he thought of the girl with hair like dancing fire, red as the desert sunset. But months of wandering on the desert made him taciturn and suspicious.

"How do I know this? You may be a *meknik* for all you can prove. And I have learned that the *mekniks* do not approve of me."

Harth chuckled.

"So I have heard. But, about that weapon of yours. I would like to use it. It would be a wondrous thing against the Darksiders. They would never capture Moornal if I had that."

"The weapon is mine. Forget it."

"You are of Klarn, man. In this time of need, you must use that weapon to save your people!"

"I am no Klarnvan. The blood of the space-wanderers is in my veins. I am son to those who lie in the big ship. I owe loyalty to none but them and Saarl—and a girl with red hair."

Harth opened his eyes very wide at that. He grinned, and turned to look at the magnship. He shouted, "Aevlyn!"

Flane backed against Saarl, ready for attack from the ship. But all he saw there was someone in a white cloak come through a doorway and stand at the rail, staring over the sands toward them. It was a girl—a girl with hair as red as the sinking sun, who looked at him and laughed and waved a white arm.

SHE was here at last, at arm's length, laughing. The others stayed at bay, eyeing the flame-gun in the crook of Flane's arm, but the girl walked toward him, calling out, "Flane! You got away that night!"

He touched her hands with his, gently, and chuckled. "You are real, then. There were times since then that I thought you

something my brain made up in the fury of battle. Real. You are real."

"Of course, I'm real! And alive, too—though how much longer I'll be alive, I don't know. Flane, the Darksiders are grown bold. They attack in the daytime, now. They kill our—my people. No one has learned the key to the Machine. Without it, the Klarnva will perish."

Flane patted the gun, grinning, "With this, the Darksiders will be no threat. Just a few blasts of the violet light, and they will run for shelter."

He told her how he found it. When he concluded, he discovered that the others had come nearer, listening in amazement. But as they made no hostile gestures, Flane did not worry. He was once again with Aevlyn.

"You must come on board the ship," she told him, walking toward the spaceship with him. "You can hold the Darksiders off while the others continue their search for the key."

Flane showed her around the great vessel, pointing out the machines that worked through some energy other than the Machine. He dropped into the hole in the ship and reappeared with an elaborately carved scabbard into which he slipped the darkly hilted sword.

"What a strangely beautiful weapon," she said when he showed it to her.

They studied the runes engraved on the blade, which told in frieze form the tale of Norda the genius, of how he and the Klarnva came first to the planet, of their struggles with the Darksiders, and the erections of the city-states, and the building of the Machine. With a long fingernail, Aevlyn traced the outlines of the tiny forms on the blade.

"They stand out from the shaft," she said slowly.

Flane held it to the light that filtered through a cracked window. His eye went along the keen edge.

"It forms a diamond shape through the middle. If we were to break it clean, those friezes would form the outer edges of the diamond, and the two sword-edges, the upper and lower points."

Flane shook his head wonderingly, staring at the blue hilt of the sword. Glitterings like the sky at night stared back at him, the buried points of light in the haft

winking and twinkling like stars. Like a beam of silver light, the blade sprang from the star-shaped guard, a shimmer of deadly steel.

"A sword like this would be famous," he muttered. "People would talk of it. And yet—and yet I have never heard of any such a sword."

"Nor have I," sighed red Aevlyn.

HARTH waited for them outside the spaceship, to walk with them across the sands toward the magniship. As they went, Flane whistled to Saarl, and drew his reins under his arm. The *megathon* trotted daintily at his heels.

Energy surged in Flane's chest, lifting it; like a great wave elevating itself in a concave greenness lipped with foam-bubbles, it grew in him. Here before him was a task: To fight the Darksiders. No longer would his life be a goalless ramble across desert sands. Instead he had a people who would be like brothers to him, who was an orphan. He stood a moment, staring at the monument of his own folk, watching sunlight dapple the silver hull of the spaceship.

Then he turned his face to the magniship and went up the ladder. He saw that Saarl was stabled below decks, and walked with Aevlyn toward the master-cabin.

Here Harth awaited him with maps and charts.

"I want to show you how bold the Darksiders have become," said the Klarnvan. "Here is Moornal, southernmost of all the city-states of the Klarn. Beyond Moornal rise a chain of mountain. In those mountains, and in the plains beyond them, dwell the Darksiders."

"I have never seen a Darksider," said Flane slowly. "I don't know much about them."

Harth said bitterly, "Klarn itself is too centralized to be aware of their threat. But we of Moornal and Yeelya—we know! We rim their perimeter. Us they raid on their fleet *megathons*, stealing our horses and our women. With lance and arrow they come, shouting *O jho! O jho!* which is their warcry."

"They are a nomad race," said Aevlyn, seated on a stool of carved *yron*. "They live in tents that collapse to fit the backs

of their pack *megathons*. They can cross miles of country in a day, so that we never find them in the same spot. Some of their men are master craftsmen. They make lances and bows that we marvel at; we marvel, too, at their skill with them."

Harth said, "I have heard it rumored that deep in the Darkside country, they have cities, patterned after ours. Their spies come and go in Moornal and Yeelya because we Klarnva aren't suspicious enough to look for them. They learn much, and quickly. It is said they have imitated our culture to a great extent."

"Are they like us that they can come and go unnoticed?" asked Flane.

"As alike as *khrees* in a pod. Usually they are browned by the sun, but then, so are our hunters and herdsman." Harth sighed, "In the olden days, when the Machine functioned, we did not need hunters and herdsman. But now—"

Flane thought fleetingly of Vawdar. Now that he was dead, all hope for the key was lost, unless by chance someone would stumble on the combination of the lock. But so many had tried, for so many years, that Flane felt positive this was an improbable chance.

He said, to take his mind off the key, "Do you intend moving against the Darksiders? Attacking them in their own domain?"

"What else can we do? Should we wait for them to attack, we should never break their power. They swoop on us in few numbers at many points. If we are too strong at one point, they flee. But one or two of their bands always makes a killing."

Flane patted the violet-gun in his hands. "With this we can make a killing ourselves!"

Over a *seethis*-wood table, Harth planned his strategy. They would go over Moornal, displaying banners to tell the people below that they were visiting Darkside to raise an army. High in the air, the last of the magniships could survey an endless countryside. At the signs of the gathered Darksider host, the ship could swing into position, and Flane could sweep their ranks with his weapon. Then the army would attack.

Flane protested, as a thought came to him, "But must we kill these Darksiders,

if they are as ourselves? Perhaps we could reason with them, teach them our culture, make them as we are."

Harth was horrified, and said so. But Flane felt a sneaking liking for the nomads; he himself had been one for uncounted months, on the desert. Besides, he was not a Klarnvan, and neither were the Darksiders. Without a race, Flane thought momentarily of adopting the outsiders as his own.

"We could teach them our knowledge," Flane continued stubbornly. "Their lances and arrows would make good trading material for them. We need good arrows and spears for hunting. Our ceramics and cities would be good bartering stuff. If we could instill in them a love for beauty, art to decorate their homes—"

"Tents!" sniffed Harth.

"Those rumored cities of their," said Flane, "will need ornament. Besides, were we to unite Klarnva and Darksiders, we might build a race that would develop its own science, so that the Machine would not be such a necessity."

Aevlyn let her red-brown eyes survey him tenderly. Her ripe mouth curved into a smile. She said to Flane, "You want to be the giant of the prophecy, who comes to unite all on Klarn beneath one banner!"

"I am no giant who carries stars in his hands," said Flane soberly, "but I try to think of the Darksiders. This was their planet. The Klarnva took it from them, ages ago. The Darksiders have rights."

Harth growled, "The Darksiders are barbarians. They raid our flocks. Now they are gathering to destroy all Moornal. Is that just?"

"No," sighed Flane. "We will have to fight them, of course. Still—"

He sighed again, and Aevlyn put her warm hand in his and squeezed it. Her laughter cheered him, and he grinned at her.

MOORNAL lay on a great wide plain where tall grasses swayed in the breeze. Far beyond it, a low-lying range of mountains girdled the plains like a belt. This was the first trip Flane had ever made in the air; every magniship in Klarn was long since rusted into uselessness, for lack of the power to repair the ravages of time. It was an eerie sensation, looking

down on rooftops and streets, and domed temples.

Aevlyn stood with her shoulder warm against his, beside the rail. "That is the culture the Darksiders would destroy," she said softly. "They would fling the blanket of their ignorance over it, make it as the ground for their *megathons* to race on."

Flane shook his head, eyes a little sad. "That is not what the Darksiders wish, Aevlyn," he frowned. "Put yourself in their place. Let us pretend that you and I are Darksiders—say, of twenty-five years ago. We come through the mountain passes on our *megathons* and sit looking at that great city. Remember, this is in the days when the Machine functions. We see that city lighted by the globular lights my mother, the Princess Gleya, used to tell me of. We see ships rise and sail majestically through the air. We see houses built so that sandstorms cannot wreck them.

"What emotions do we feel? Awe. And jealousy, yes. We want the security, the happiness, of that city. We do not wish to destroy it. We would be only too willing to be allowed to come and dwell in it. But the Klarnva will not have us."

The red-haired girl stared up at Flane, a long-nailed hand brushing back a lock of her russet hair. Her eyes were wide.

"You are strange, Flane. You can see others, and feel for them, as they themselves. We Klarnva are not like that."

A bit boastfully, Flane said, "That is because I am not a Klarnvan myself. I am the son of the space-travellers, whom you saw in that big ship. I wish I knew what my people were like."

"You almost make me feel sorry for the Darksiders," whispered the girl, standing close to him.

Flane held her soft and warm in the crook of his arm. With his lips he caressed her cheeks and mouth, tenderly. He whispered, "The union of a space-traveller and a Klarnvan might bring forth a new breed of men and women."

Aevlyn flushed and hid her face in his throat, but her fingertips stroked his jaw gently, lovingly.

"A new race of men," Flane went on dreamily. "Men who would live with Darksider and Klarnvan in peace, with

food for all, and trade to make all men wealthy."

"It's a good dream," whispered Aevlyn, "but foolish."

It is foolish, thought Flane, because the races on Klarn are sliding backwards to barbarism. If only the Machine functioned! Why, if he, Flane, could make the Machine hum, he could unite the men on Klarn. They would obey his dictates, or he would refuse them the powers of the Machine! It was as simple as that.

The shouting of a lookout roused him. With Aevlyn at his side, he went to stand at the rail, staring across the plains toward Moornal. A man was on a racing *megathon*, bent low across his back, swooping like a swallow in flight down into gulches, and up across the level plain. Once he flung up an arm and waved it at the ship.

A rope was flung to him, and he came up it hand over hand.

Panting, the messenger stood before Harth.

"Word has come from Klarn," he sobbed from weariness. "The *mekniks* have invited the Darksiders to join them in expelling the *dulars*. They promise the Darksiders that, for their help, they will aid them to conquer the other cities of the Klarnva!"

Harth grunted curses, looking at Flane.

Flane patted his weapon and grinned mirthlessly, "We'd better hurry, Harth. Perhaps we can catch the Darksiders before they unite with the *mekniks*. If ever they join forces, even this violet fire in my hands may not be enough to stop them!"

He said to the messenger, "How many of the Darksiders go to Klarn?"

"They are as the stars twinkling in the sky on a cold winter night," he answered. "They have with them many queer engines of destruction. They march side by side with the mountain chain, so that we of the plains will not notice them."

"I posted spies on the fastest *megathons* we owned," said Harth. "Were they the ones who brought this news?"

"They are. They say that even if we could equip an army with *megathons* as fleet as theirs, there would be no chance to overtake the Darksiders."

Flane walked back and forth, like a

caged *valgon*. He saw ruin of all his hopes crashing around him. No longer was there chance to unite Darksider and Klarnva, if once the *mekniks* and the outlanders joined forces. They would be mad with blood-lust, with the hot urge to kill and conquer. It was too late. Even the violet weapon could not help him.

Unless—

He whirled on Harth, crying, "Full speed over those mountains! We are the sole hope of the Klarnva, we in this magniship. Under our feet is the only power that can bring us to the Darksiders before they merge with the *mekniks*."

"Are you mad?" whispered Harth, eyes round. "We number a few score on the ship. Can we stand before the Darksiders in battle?"

"Can't you see? We have to. If we fail, then there will be none to mourn us, for the Darksiders and the *mekniks* will sweep over the cities of the Klarn as a sandstorm sweeps the desert! We can't stop to reckon consequences. It is all or nothing. We must toss the dice—and clean our weapons!"

Aevlyn stood by his side, red mouth curving into a tiny smile.

"He asks us to go with him and taste death, Harth," she whispered. "We have no chance, and yet—and yet, I vote to go with him."

Harth shrugged, "What use for me to speak? If the hereditary princess of the Moornalian Klarnva says we fight, then we fight."

There were tears in Aevlyn's eyes as she looked at Flane.

She whispered, "If only we had a chance!"

III

FOR FIVE DAYS and nights, the magniship crept through the mountains. Over jagged peak and snow-draped hump they floated swiftly. At its rails stood keen-eyed men who strained their sight peering across the barren plains beyond, and fingered shining weapons. Occasionally, they ran wet tongues around dry lips, for the mark of death lay strong upon them.

There was no jollity at meals, except where Flane ate. Morosely, the men

stared at one another, and bent to their plates. A pall hung over the ship, bathing those who rode it.

Flane was different. He still laughed and jested, and spent the moonlit nights walking the deck with Aevlyn.

"What use to brood?" he asked her. "Our fate is written somewhere, perhaps in that great cave where dwells the All-High that the Princess Gleya told me of. He sits there and watches all our deeds enacted before him."

"I would like to go and peer over His shoulder to see our immediate future," the girl sighed, clinging to Flane.

"Seeing it would not change it," said Flane. "Not knowing, but doing and fighting every inch of the pathway through life—that's what counts!"

He looked at the blade with the seven stars in it, holding it up so that moonlight made it glimmer.

"This is what counts—holding a sword in your hand and using it to fight for what is right and just. It's like a key to your own future. When you hold it, you can't fail!"

Aevlyn pressed against him, whispering, "I wish I were of your race, Flane. You never admit defeat, even if you have already failed!"

Flane grunted, "Failed? Just because we didn't have time to raise that army at Moornal? We take a different path, that's all. It may lead to the same goal. Who knows?"

ON THE MORNING of the sixth day, a lookout yelled. Flane leaped to the rail, clung to it with strong, supple hands. His eyes glinted with excitement.

The host of the Darksiders lay like a swollen shadow along the ground. It seethed and moved in restless waves, flowing forward. Big vans and wagons were piled high with spears and arrows, pulled by draft-megathons whose manes flowed in the wind. On war-megathons and on foot the Darksiders surged like an irresistible wave across the plains. On high waved their *kaatra*-tail banners. Here and there a pennon whipped like a striking lash in the breeze. And their engines of war, their catapults and mangonels, trundled along at the same swift pace.

"They will overflow the Klarnvan cit-

ies," whispered Flane to himself. "There is nothing on all Klarn that can stop that horde—except my violet gun. And even that—" he shook his head dubiously, staring at the vast throng below.

On board the magnship there was great activity. Men ran back and forth, reaching for weapons, shouting hoarsely.

Now the horde had seen them. A roar went up from the assembled throats, the howl of a wolf on sighting its prey. Lifted lances shook, sunlight glistening from their sanded tips. Here and there a bow was raised, and an arrow fitted to its string. The tailed banners danced in the hands of the standard-bearers.

"Let me speak to them," Flane said to Harth who nervously fingered a dagger in his belt. "I may dissuade them from their venture. If only I had the key to the Machine! Then, indeed, would I have a weapon to bargain with!"

He wound his legs in a plaited rope and was dangled over the side, below the flat keel of the ship. He swayed in the wind, the violet gun at ease in his hands.

A Darksider with a wolfskin wrapped around him bellowed upwards, racing underneath him, trying to stab him with his spear. Flane grinned and shouted, "Peace, Darksider. I come to offer terms."

A group of mounted outlanders rode toward him. They sat their saddles easily, bending as their steeds curvetted.

"The people of Moornal desire to dwell in peace with the Darksiders," shouted Flane. "We look for the key to the Machine. If we find it, the Machine's power will be given to all."

A Darksider roared laughter, turning to his companions, gesturing a hairy arm at Flane.

"The hanging one offers peace. We will make peace, after we have wetted our blades in his flesh, and the flesh of all his kind!"

They laughed hoarsely and took turns heaving war-lances at Flane where he hung in the ropes. One of the spears came so close to him he could have reached out and caught it. Flane sighed and lifted the violet gun. He did not want to slay these men. But he had to. They needed a lesson.

He sighted along the barrel and pressed the button. From the mouth of the gun the lavender flame came with a swoosh

and dropped around the outlanders. It lay among them like the overflow of a rainbow, scintillating and glowing. Then it dissipated.

Where the mounted Darksiders had stood and hurled their spears there was only a botch of darkened ground. Even the long grasses were gone.

"Oww!" howled the thousands who watched with fear stamped upon their faces. "Oww! Here is the magic of the Klarnva come to eat us up!"

Some of them wheeled their mounts to run, but a great fellow whose fair blonde hair spilled to his shoulders, lifted a gnarled club in his hand and rallied them.

"What?" he roared. "Do we flee before one man? Feather me an arrow in his hide so that he will drop that flaming thing he holds. Then *we* may use it."

Arrows carried farther than did spears. Flane scampered back up the ropes as shafts started to slither in among the cordage. He put a hand on the rail and swung over. Panting, he stood and stared at the horde that raced for them.

"Arrows and spears will never take the ship," he said, "but those war-engines might."

He called to Harth, "Pass the ship over their machines. I must destroy them."

Flane went to the rail and leaned on it, watching the ground slide under him. Now they were over the assembled tribes, skimming low. The war-engines were just beyond them. Flane lifted his gun, held it in readiness.

He fired once.

A massive catapult went violet, and disappeared.

He fired again, and again.

Mangonels flared, fading.

BUT NOW the Darksiders were using their rocks against the magniship. Great jagged stones came crashing and bouncing on the deck. Men screamed, caught under them. Flesh was mashed, and ran red blood. One rock pierced the sides of the ship and clattered inside it, rolling and tumbling. Men moaned in the depths of the vessel, where the stone had gone.

Flane thinned his lips and fired faster, and faster.

One by one he encompassed the en-

gines with the violet fire, and one by one they flared and disappeared.

Now there were none left, and Flane turned from the rail with a sigh of satisfaction.

He stood stock-still, staring.

The deck of the magniship listed at a peculiar angle. It was difficult to walk on it, for one side was lifted toward the sky, and the other pointed down toward earth. He had been so engrossed in his destruction of the war-engines, that he had not noticed.

The horde roared its triumph.

"She sinks! She sinks! She is coming toward us! Now we shall have the gun!"

Flane went across the deck with flying feet. He caught at a stanchion, swung in through an open door, shouting, "Lift it! Lift her nose."

Aevlyn was pale, watching him beside Harth who stared unseeing at the man in the doorway.

Aevlyn whispered, "It's no use, Flane! Those rocks they hurled swept away the red magnetic balls on the port side of the ship. We're done for. We can't stay up much longer."

"We can stay up long enough to get to the mountains," Flane rasped, pointing to where the green-and-brown hills rose toward the clouds. "There we can make a stand. The Darksiders can come at us only a few at a time. We can hold out until help comes from Moornal. It is our only hope."

Harth slapped the table with the palm of his hand, violently, so that a quill and an inkbottle bounced a little.

"Sheer madness!" he bellowed, rising swiftly to his feet. "Now I have listened to you, Flane and Klarn, and I have given you your way. But from now on, it shall be Harth of Moornal who says what we shall do."

Flane's fingers opened and closed. His green eyes flared hotly, and he opened his mouth to snarl fierce words. Then Aevlyn was before him, the perfume of her auburn hair delicate in his nostrils, looking up at him. Her brown eyes begged with his.

Flane sighed, "And what are those orders, Harth?"

"We flee back to Moornal. We raise an army and—"

Flane chuckled, "Idiot! I thought the ship was broken."

"We can bargain with the Darksiders. They may yet give us terms."

Flane took him by the arm and led him to the port window. They had an unobstructed view of the plains from there. They saw the shaggy *megathons* racing with their bellies to the ground while their riders shook pennoned lances over their heads, charging. A sword blade glowed red in the sun, lifted into the air. A thundering of hooves rocked the ground. Voices bellowed, roared their hate.

"Those are no warriors to give quarter. Not after what we have done to their leaders and their engines of war!" Flane rasped.

He hit Harth across the chest with the back of his hand.

"Man, man! You bear weapons. Do you know how to use them?"

Harth nodded sullenly, watching the Darksiders come nearer and nearer. He showed his teeth in a mirthless grin.

"They think us easy meat," Harth said softly. His eyes began to burn.

"We could find a cave somewhere in those mountains," Flane went on, his eyes keen on Harth's face. "We could make a stand there. It could be so costly that the Darksiders might leave us, so as not to miss the *mekniks*."

Harth turned to him with a chuckle, "You are a sly dog, Flane. You persuade a man that his death is a marvelous thing. Ah, well. You may be right. We'll do as you say, as usual. I see no other course."

Flane leaped from the cabin, sped along the tilting deck on the starboard side, half-running on the wall of the cabin. He shouted the men out of their battle stations, swept them up in the whirl of his own enthusiasm.

"Overboard with everything movable! Heave it over. Retain only food and weapons. Everything else goes. We've got to get the ship up that mountain!"

Aevlyn ran to him, to be near him, and to spur on the men with her presence. She put soft white hands to lamps and cushions, carrying them to the rail and casting them. Chairs and tables were borne by the men who formed quick-moving lines at Flane's directions. Soon the cabins lay stripped and bare, except for the men who

clustered in them, polishing and sharpening swords and lances.

Flane went with Aevlyn to the prow of the magniship, hearing Harth bellow orders to the helmsman.

Inch by inch the crippled vessel went up. Scraping past the tops of trees, grating its keel on a jagged lip of rock, it mounted steadily. The trees fell away below, yielding place to massive rocks that lay piled and scattered on one another like sleeping kittens. Like giants slain and scattered in battle lay the boulders.

"There!" shouted Flane, pointing.

A BARE SPACE towered above the tossed rocks, flat on top and jagged at the sides. A steep path rose sharply to the level of the empty mesa, up which three men could walk abreast. It was the only means of entrance to the fortress of stone, for behind it, as though sheared by a gigantic sword, the cliff was cut away. Behind the mesa dropping thousands of feet straight down, a gorge was sliced into the mountain.

"We could hold that mesa forever," Flane grinned, "given enough food and water. Only three men can come at us at once. There is no way of retreat, except by falling to our deaths in the gorge."

Even Harth grunted, "It isn't so bad. A man could die a good death there, with his weapons red with his enemy's blood. As we all probably will."

Flane sighed, "If only we could get word to the Klarnva in Moornal and Yeel-ya! Then our stand here would be worth while. It would give the cities time to unite, to put an army in the field."

Aevlyn was buckling on a cape fitted with cabin-mail at breast and shoulder. She said suddenly, "One man might make Moornal in the magniship. He could spread word."

"You!" said Flane and Harth in one breath, but Aevlyn came close to Flane and shook her red mop of hair.

"No. I stay with Flane. I will never be separated from him again. Send another. I will not go."

Flane cajoled and begged and finally commanded, but Aevlyn bubbled laughter between her full red lips, and patted his hands. Her fiery hair swirled as she shook her head, brown eyes a-dance.

"I stay with you, Flane, come death or life! Now stop, for time grows short. Pick another who knows the ship and let him go."

Harth and Flane shrugged at each other and selected a man whose arm had been broken by a catapult stone. They gave him food and drink, and fastened him to the helm of the ship, but his weapons they took from him. He could not use them, and there were men who would be desperately in need of extra weapons soon.

"All Klarn rides your ship," Flane told him. "Summon the men of Yeelya, too. You will not be in time to rescue us, but you may bring the threat of the Darksiders to a sorry finish."

One after the other they dropped from the ship as it skimmed the mesa. Swords in one hand and violet-gun in the other, Flane landed cat-like and was up, racing toward the sloping adit to the level rock. A few of the Darksiders could be seen in the distance, coming up over a ridge, pointing lances toward them, shouting.

Aevlyn stood with hands clasped to her breasts, staring after the drifting ship as it dipped into the gorge. It bounced a little as an air current caught at it, then slipped along the channel between the cliffs that an ancient river had eaten away in the solid rock.

"May the All-High have him ever in His sight," she whispered.

An arrow whined past her. She turned, seeing Flane at the approach to the mesa, deflecting them, one after another, with the glittering sword in his hand. Now the Darksiders were howling up the slope, racing on foot, leaping from *megathon* to stone, waving swords and axes.

Flane met them, grinning. His steel slipped and slithered past their guards, drinking deep in chests and thighs.

The leading Darksiders would have fallen back, but now the horde was on them, and a swirling maelstrom of battle-maddened men drove in low for the kill. Only three of them could come at once up that slope, but they came on in a steady wave that climbed over the bodies of the fallen, throwing spears, slashing down and upwards with sword and battle-axe.

Flane fought until the breath whistled in his throat, until his arms were scarred

with wounds, and ran red blood. Someone yanked on him, pulled him from the press, and he stood sobbing for air as Aevlyn dabbed a dry cloth at his cuts. When she offered him white wine in a copper flagon, he drank deep; with the back of his hand he dried his mouth and grinned at her.

"It will be night presently," she whispered. "Then the men will have a rest."

"So soon?" questioned Flane blankly, looking at the sun.

"You fought for hours there," Aevlyn smiled, kneeling to ease a dying man's pains. "Some grumbled that you sought all the glory for yourself."

Flane chuckled, looking out at the tribes that hemmed them in, building camps and fires, and erecting *kaatra*-hide tents. He whispered savagely, "Glory enough for all at this fight." He shook his head, and his green eyes narrowed. "There are many of them," he said slowly. "Too many."

He lifted the violet-gun and carried it to a jagged edge of rock; rested it in a crotch of stone, leaning cheek against the wooden stock. He smiled mirthlessly to himself, thinking: I will reduce some of that number, now. His finger pressed the button of the gun and a lavender flame swept from the muzzle toward the assembled horde. Bolt after bolt he fired, carefully, until the ullulating wail of the stricken Darksiders reverberated from the cliffs.

The violet gun clicked and made odd sounds.

FLANE stared at it, wondering. The thought that it might need fuel to work never occurred to him. He looked on the gun as supernatural, and anything as mundane as ammunition for it was as foreign to his mind as the stars.

There might be one more blast left, he reasoned, and gave it to Aevlyn.

It was dark now, and the three moons of Klarn swam slowly into the sky. Red fires dotted the stone plateau before the mesa, where Darksiders squatted or sat, eating. On the mesa, men hastily bolted food and ran back to the entrance, drying their weapons. There was no concerted night attack; there was worse, for soon the arrows began to arch among them. Biting into leg and arm and chest, at random, the steel-tipped shafts scattered the

men, which sword and axe could not do. Soon they were all huddled behind the up-lifting rocks at the mesa-edge, where the shafts could not follow.

A surprise attack caught a faceful of defending blades, and broke away, as a wave from the seawall.

Dawn found the men of Moornal bloody and weary, but the hot sunlight drove new strength into hack-weary arms and they met each new attack with cries of scorn and defiance. Flane was everywhere: standing for long hours in the pass, his sword singing; encouraging his men by the magical slaughter of his blade, slapping them on backs, encouraging, cajoling, commanding . . .

All day and all night they made their stand. Baked by the day and frozen by the night, they grew gaunt and haggard, as lean as hunting wolves, and as dangerous. Men did not talk on the mesa now. They lifted lips in silent snarls. They cast dark glances from under lowering brows. Their hands grew used to the hilt of sword and the haft of lance. Some could scarcely unbend their fingers long enough to eat.

Of the lot, Flane looked most wolfish. His black hair drooped untended, loose on his shoulders. His uniform was cut and torn, disclosing bloodied skin, brown flesh ripped by axe and sword-edge. But his muscles still rolled as before, and the blade in his hand was a portal to beyond for any who came face to point with it.

Aevlyn slept close to him during the night, tending the wounds received during the day. Under hot sunlight she was always at his call, with water and with cheer, for the men who were most in need of either.

On the next day, the Darksiders withdrew in order, going down the ramp and assembling on the flat plateau. Flane leaned on his sword and stared out over their heads, at a horseman who spurred his mount across the tumbled rocks, lifting him in a jump.

"A *meknik*," Flane rasped, spitting. "Now the All-High must indeed be smiling, for the fates could have no worse in store for us. They have come to join the Darksiders."

A man, naked to the waist and bearing a broken lance in his hand as a stabbing spear, laughed gutterally, "Good! I've

wanted to take a few of them with me when I went."

Flane smiled mirthlessly, "You'll have your wish, if the water holds out."

He looked around, biting his lips. The axes and swords and arrows of the Darksiders had been busy. Of the original forty who dropped to the mesa, there were but six who stood erect; and of them, one was a woman. Harth lay shorn from shoulder to navel on the rocks below. He had met his hero's death. All of them were wounded. Even Aevlyn had a red rag wrapped about an arm. Flane breathed harshly.

They had made a stand, they had!

Aie! Let the harpers tell of this battle!

FLANE glanced at his blade. It was chined and nicked, and hung by a needle of steel to the hilt. Laughing shortly, he tapped it against a lip of rock and watched it drop onto the stones below. He went and drew the blue-hilted sword from the ornate scabbard and shook it in the air.

"By the dead **hand** that held you, you'll quench your **thirst** this day, you blue beauty!" he howled.

The *mekniks* were pouring onto the rocky plain now, and the Darksiders greeted them with cries of delight. Beside Flane, Aevlyn said bitterly, "Thousands more against us!"

Flane laughed, "The odds even, darling!"

He rested on his blade, watching the big blonde Darksider who led most of the attacks with a gnarled club in his hand, walk toward them. Two *mekniks* paced at his side.

"Surrender, Flane of Klarn," the blonde said. "We offer safe conduct to you all."

Flane laughed in his face.

"The *mekniks* would never let me live, Darksider," he replied. "Better a death in the open air than a dagger under the ribs on a dark night while I sleep."

He saw the *mekniks* scowl at him. The Darksider said, "We will come and take you!"

"Then come, club-swinger! My sword whispers to me that it wants to look beneath your skin."

The club-bearer waved an arm, and archers trotted forward, to form a circle around him. The Darksider waved at the

mesa, crying, "Sweep that spot for me. The time for play has ended!"

FLANE went white. This was what he dreaded—a flight of war-arrows to keep the passage clear while the Dark-siders attacked. In the press of battle the archers could not fire, for their arrows would fell their own men as well as defenders. But with an arrow storm to clear the way, and then an attack in force—

"Fall back!" he shouted.

The arrows whistled, coming at them. Some broke against rock uprights, some dropped and skidded along the mesa floor. One or two found flesh and dead men fell, to fight no more.

Flane whispered, "Four left. Four and Aevlyn."

With his red left arm, he shoved her behind him, blue-hilted sword deflecting an arrow. Slowly he backed against the sheer gorge. A man dropped at his feet, the arrow still humming in his back. Another man, caught by a thrown spear, slipped over the edge of the gorge, and plunged downward, screaming.

Flane and the man standing beside him looked at each other and chuckled grimly.

"It was a good fight, Flane."

"We stood them off two days and a night," agreed Flane. "They'll put us in their legends, the Darksiders will. They like brave men."

The man laughed, "As a ghost I'll come to their winter campfires and listen to their bards extolling us. It will be a reward, in a way."

Club in hand, the blonde Darksider was leaping toward them, a line of axemen and archers at his back. Before them the Darksiders saw two men, and a girl with hair the color of a sunset. In her white hands she held the violet gun. The two men were bloody and fierce, unshaven, in rags. Swords glimmered in their hands as they stood waiting. They had fought well, but the time for play was over.

"Take them," cried the club-bearer.

But Flane astounded them by coming in himself, bent low, right arm up and swinging. His blade came and went, and where it had been, the knees of a dying man buckled. Uniform in tatters, brown skin dyed red, he was a miracle of speed and sureness—and slaughter.

Behind him Aevlyn watched, dangerous as a tigress whose kittens are threatened. The violet gun came up, covering Flane's back.

Men drove in for that unprotected back, daggers lifted. The violet gun belched once, and then it died. But that once was enough. The lavender fire sizzled and flared, and it ate up the men and their weapons. But Flane had already whirled, and his sword stabbed out, toward the purple flame.

The blade swam in the amethyst mist; glowed brightly, shimmering with opalescent hues. With staring eyes, Flane watched the steel dissipate into drifting powder.

He held half a sword in his hand.

A cry of alarm broke from the lips of the Darksiders. They eyed the half-blade, mouths open in awe. From guard and pommel it coruscated blazing whiteness as the sun caught at the seven globes inside the blue stuff. Like suns those points of whiteness glittered . . . *like stars!*

"The prophecy!" howled the Darksiders.

"He bears the stars in his hand!"

"He holds the key to the Machine!"

The blonde Darksider stared at him, frowning. He let the club fall until its knotted end hit the stone.

"Is it true, Flane of Klarn?" he whispered. "Is that sword the key to the Machine, as the prophecy has said?"

Flane looked at the sword, at the blue hilt with its blazing pinpricks of light, at the diamond-shaped blade that was half a blade, now—

It was the truth!

The diamond blade was key to the Machine! Fool, fool, not to have guessed! Its diamond shape, and the star-formed guard, and the dead body beneath the spaceship: the Keeper, of course! The stars in the hilt for the prophecy, and the blade for the key!

"Yes," he cried hoarsely, "oh, All-Highest, yes!"

The blonde Darksider dropped the club and knelt before Flane, lowering his head. A great rustling was heard, as the other Darksiders knelt with him. Only the *mek-niks* drew aside, muttering.

"You are him for whom the Darksiders have prayed, year in and year out," he

said. "You are the saviour who is to come, to unite Darksider and Klarnvan. You bear the key!"

Flane heard Aevlyn sobbing behind him, as he lifted the sword and stared at it. He felt like weeping, too. For the diamond-shaped blade was only half a blade, now. The violet fire had eaten it up. The key to the Machine was in his hand at last, but it was a ruined key!

The Darksider was bowing and saying, "I swear fealty to the bearer of the sun-starred sword, for he shall be my Keeper."

Behind him the others roared out the ancient oath, their voices lifting triumphantly.

"By the grip that plunges home the blade, by the hand that is turned away to ward off evil, by the voice of the Machine, I swear my oath and pledge my faith. I am obedient. I am true. I am his who bears the sword!"

The rolling echo of the oath was swept into silence, but still Flane stared at the broken sword in his hand.

A ruined key!

There was no hope, now!

Flane stood with legs apart and flung his head to the blue sky and howled his laughter like a madman, until froth grew in the corners of his mouth, and tears rolled down his cheeks. . . .

IV

THE SUN lay like a crimson ball on the horizon. Flooded with its red rays were the waving grass fields, and the riders of the *megathons* that sped across them. Hooves rose and fell, as the stallions' heads stretched forward, eager for the run.

Flane and Aevlyn rode side by side. There were bandages still on their arms, on Flane's chest and thigh. Behind them thundered Besl, the blonde Darksider, and a *dular* from Moornal.

The cool wind in his face made Flane grin; made him stare, in sheer gladness at being alive, at the grassy plain, the swollen, crimson sun, the distant blue mountains.

He had not thought to be alive today.

There had been confusion on the mesa after he had laughed. The *mekniks* were all for throwing him into the gorge, but

the Darksiders saw in him the savior of their prophecy, and would not have him touched.

"This is the key to the Machine," Flane informed them, showing them the ruined blade. "The blade is the key."

"The blade is gone," growled a sullen *meknik*.

"Not all of it. Only the foible of the blade. The forte remains. It may be sufficient to turn the lock. It is worth a try. Speak out—do I go to Klarn with a safe conduct, or do you try throwing me in the gorge?"

The giant blonde came to Flane's side and lifted his club.

"I, Besl, promise safe conduct for the Keeper," he roared, looking at the *mekniks* with sullen eye, "and any who interferes shall be treated as enemies."

As sullenly, the *mekniks* agreed. They could not do otherwise, for without the Darksiders, they were no match for the *dulars* of Klarn.

One of them said, "But we cannot vouchsafe a passage through the city itself. Other *mekniks* might not agree with us."

"I'll risk that," snapped Flane. "I have gone through them once. I can do it again."

Later, when they were alone, Flane said to Aevlyn, "It is but a forlorn hope. When the stem of a key is gone, the lock will not open. And the foible of this blade is part of the key, too. And it is powder on the rocks."

"Then why go to Klarn at all?" sighed Aevlyn, out of the weariness of her spirit, tired of seeing men die and blood run red.

"Because there is still a chance. A slim one, true. But—a chance!"

Her eyes were dark and worshipping, staring up at his grim face. She whispered, "Brood of the space-wanderers! You never quit, do you, Flane? You always keep on, even after you've failed!"

"My stubbornness hasn't hurt us yet. I wouldn't give up on the desert, and thus I won the sword, and you. I kept Harth fighting, and we've discovered that the sword is a key to the Machine! Now—well, what the All-High can see in His cave, He shall see!"

The Darksiders provided them with

swift, tireless *megathons*. Flane missed Saarl, but Saarl was in Moornal now, if the magniship got back. The dun mount he straddled was a good beast. When they were in the saddle, Besl swung onto a black stallion beside them.

"I go as a watchdog, Flane of Klarn. If you fail, I carry word to the Darksiders, to bring fire and steel through the cities of the Klarnva."

"Good enough," Flane grunted, but Aevlyn pressed his hand with hers, bowing her head, biting her lips until a drop of blood welled.

They crossed the mountain trails, and headed out over the plains. The great sand-stretches were dotted by eremophytic plants that lifted thorny branches toward a clear sky. It was a land of peace, where cactus dwelt with mesquite, and the riotous reds and yellows of the wildflowers splashed the desert with colour. Flane wondered whether this peace would soon be shattered by the flaming red clamour of war.

His thought almost came to reality on the third day. At noon the riders sighted a vast host moving toward them from the west. Flane stood in his stirrups, staring beneath a palm. Then Aevlyn saw the maroon pennons fluttering from glittering lancetops and cried, "They come from Moornal!"

There were golden swans among the maroon banners. She said again, "The men of Yeelya. Truly, the Klarnva are gathered to fight it out with the Darksiders."

A cluster of horsemen broke from the array and galloped toward them. Flane and Aevlyn and Besl met them with palms extended, although the warriors had long since recognized the fiery red hair of the girl. At Besl they shot dark glances, and some of them fingered the hafts of their swords.

Flane told his story, swiftly. The deputation from Moornal and Yeelya drew away; whispered among themselves with many gestures, once in a while glancing toward Flane and the half-sword that hung at his side.

An old man with hair the color of mountain snow broke from their group and came to Flane.

"We will abide by the trial of the

sword," he said simply. "If the Machine works, then we will gladly live in peace with the Darksiders and the *mekniks* of Klarn. Aye, we will help establish you as Keeper of the Machine, Flane of Klarn, that all may share its benefits."

Besl grunted his surprise, "I never thought to hear a man of Moornal speak words like that."

The warrior smiled grimly, "I am an old man. When I remember how life was in my mouth," he sighed, "I would be friend of any who helped to bring it back."

The old man flung up an arm to his retainer and wheeled his horse beside Flane's stallion. He explained, "I go as Besl does. To bring my people the word. *War — or peace.*"

THEY RODE for many days, across the grasslands and into the desert, skirting that until they came to an ancient rock road.

And how they galloped into a red sunset, knowing that before the three moons rose, they would see the spires of Klarn in the distance. Within an hour they drew rein; clustered together, silent.

Sitting their saddles on a hill, they all looked at the black towers of Klarn crouching below them, at the domed temple, the flat-roofed houses. The red Dragon Gate seemed covered with blood in the last rays of the sun.

"We must go unseen into that city," Flane said. "And, as unseen, find the temple of the Machine. There will be guards at the Dragon Gate. Leave them to me."

The beacon lights in the dragons' mouths roared gustily, glared scarlet in the blue darkness where Flane came out of it with a naked dagger in his hand. His rush toppled both guards. Before their writhing mouths could make a sound, his right arm lifted, drove downward twice with slim steel blade.

He straddled the still forms, curving an arm at the others who slipped from saddle to earth and came toward him.

"We must be swift," Flane said. "The *mekniks* don't know of the truce their kind have made. Do not be seen or we'll never reach the temple."

Through side streets and alleyways Flane led them. Where shadows bulked

black and grim, their running forms made odd silhouettes. Between two columns, they paused to stare at the Temple. It loomed gigantic in the blackness. Besl grunted softly, "I've never seen anything like it!" Then they were going across the quadrangle, stooping low, eyes peering left and right.

The sentry whirled as Flane came for him, but he whirled too slow. A brawny forearm locked about his throat, and he died with steel in his chest.

Flane drove into the temple, across its tiled floor.

He came to a stop before the Machine.

The others came softly forward. They stood a little behind him, staring up at the metal bulk, whose levers and dials shone with reflected light from the three moons swirling across the skies.

Aevlyn sobbed wearily. Besl whispered prayers to his Darksider gods. The old warrior whispered, "I have not looked on the glory of Klarn for many years, but it seems only as yesterday that I saw and heard the Keeper explaining its function. It works by radiation, you know. The globes filled with whitish powder store up sun energy, via the yellow prism in the desert. Solar energy, he called it. The Machine, when it works, picks up that energy and sends it all over Klarn in bands of power that drives all engines.

"It heats our cities. It lights our lights. It fires our guns. It even feeds us by helping to raise food. At least—it used to."

Flane tried not to think of the utter weariness in the old man's voice as he stepped forward. With his right hand he drew out the ruined sword, stared down at it; ran a fingertip along the shattered blade. The old man voiced the weariness of all the Klarn.

If the machine failed to work—

Flane did not like to think of that.

He stepped forward, lifting the blade.

He thrust it home, into the diamond-shaped opening. The blade clicked in, fitting perfectly.

And nothing happened.

The Machine was truly dead above them. Aevlyn sobbed. She came to stand with him, pressing her arm shoulder to his in comfort as he leaned against the

cold metal side of the Machine, hammering his fist against it until the knuckles bled.

Behind them Besl sighed, "Now that is too bad. I shall hate to order the *kaatra*-tail banners forward, but I have no choice."

Flane lifted his hand, looked down at the torn flesh, at the dark blood staining his flesh. Aevlyn was whispering to him but he did not hear. He was deaf to everything, at that moment.

A hand patted his arm sadly, and then the old man from Moornal turned on his heel and went out of the Temple, bowed and broken. With him went Besl. In the quadrangle before the Temple they came to a stop and stared at each other. The big Darksider saw tears furrowing the cheeks of the old man.

"I had thought to see a new world, Besl. The old world come to life again. Gaiety and laughter, play and sunshine. I thought Flane was the one the prophecy told of, with his foreign blood and his blue sword. I would have staked my neck on it."

"Yes," grunted Besl. "So too would I."

"War," groaned the old man. "There will be nothing left of Klarn. Nothing, except a few wandering tribes. The city-states will go. Darksider and Klarnvan will eat each other up."

Besl nodded glumly.

Heavily they strode to the red Dragon Gate. Swinging into their saddles, they swung their horses' heads around, and cantered into the night.

FROM the Temple balcony that overlooked the city, Flane and Aevlyn watched them. Like toys they seemed, rider and mount blending motion to infinite grace. They saw Besl and the old man lift their right arms, salute; saw them take separate paths as they rode on.

"Each goes to summon his people to war," Flane said heavily.

Aevlyn leaned her cheek against his bare, scarred arm.

"Failure!" Flane rasped harshly, with a bitter laugh. "I've failed all right. Now will there be a war, and nothing but war. The *dulars* of Klarn and Moorna! and Yeelya against the Darksiders and the *mekniks*. Few will survive."

Aevlyn turned him slowly, traced the lines of his cheeks and mouth with quivering fingertips. Two tears glistened beneath her lashes as she struggled to smile.

"We may still make a new world," she whispered. "It is not too late."

"When those riders reach their armies, a wave of steel and fire will rise over Klarn."

Aevlyn rubbed her face against his throat. She whispered, "I love you, Flane. Together we may bring order out of chaos. Somehow. You are still my Keeper."

"Listen, darling," she went on, raising her glowing face to his. "I swear fealty to the bearer of the sun-starred sword, for he shall be my Keeper. By the grip that plunges home the blade, by the hand that is turned away, by the—"

She broke off alarmed.

Her brown eyes sought Flane's face, read it—saw hope struggling to rise through bitterness. His green eyes danced. His lips grew slack. He hugged her to him; kissed lips, and cheeks and chin.

"That's it! That's it!" he shouted.

He leaped for the Temple interior, and Aevlyn had to run to keep up with him. Half-laughing and half-crying, she sobbed, "What is it, Flane?"

"The way the sword goes home! I was a fool not to have realized it."

"You're going to try the Machine again, with the sword? But it doesn't work! You saw that."

Flane laughed, "No harm to try once more, is there?" He came before the Machine and picked up the sword where he had dropped it in his despair. To the star-friezes in the wall he came and held out the sword to Aevlyn.

"In holding the hilt of a sword in combat, you usually grasp it with the ends of the fingers toward you, as in a parry in *tierce*. Now suppose I turn the hand away, like this, so that the fingertips are away from me, and the back of my hand is toward me. By the grip that plunges home the blade, by the hand that is *turned away*—"

With the back of his hand toward him, Flane slammed in the sword.

The five tiny stars imbedded in the star-guard began to glow weirdly in their blue transparent envelope. Dully they

shone at first, then grew more brilliant until they blazed. Like tiny suns they twinkled, fitted over the star-shaped frieze in the wall of the Machine. Flane stared at them.

He knew, suddenly, and laughed aloud. "It isn't the blade that does it," he cried in his delight. "There is no key—not a key such as we know. The Machine operates via those lights in the star-shaped guard of the sword, Aevlyn. They must be bits of that white powder stored in the prism. They are solar energy! Look how they shine in the Machine!"

They shimmered magically inside the blue stuff, glowing and pulsating with white fire.

Aevlyn cried out, a hand lifted, pointing. The lights were going on, all over Klarn.

One by one they came into being, glimmering fitfully as long-unused filaments surged with flooded power. Whitenely they, shone, then grew bright and still brighter. A pale halo of reflection lifted from street and house and rooftop, bathing the city in its dim aura.

From the houses came the cries and screams of men and women. The screams deepened, grew into a roar, a bellow of sheer, unbelievable joy, of incredulous happiness. Flane and Aevlyn heard the triumphal peal of it, the hope become reality in its tones. They shivered in delight, laughing.

Flane drew her, an arm about her lissome waist, out with him onto the balcony. Beneath them the city was aflame with brilliance.

Aevlyn whispered, "You turned another failure into your biggest success, Flane. You made the Machine work. If you hadn't—" she shuddered and crept closer in his arms. Her voice was dreamy, as she went on, "Now your word will be law on all Klarn. The Darksiders under Besl will see to that. You are their champion. The *dulars* will be so happy to have their lights and heat again that they will acknowledge you, too. And the *mekniks*—well, they are heavily outnumbered, and when they see what the machine will do for them, they'll agree. Their power will fade as night when the lights went on."

Dawn was breaking all over Klarn.



Redskins! Boston tealeggers! Jeep men! Time traveler Devin Orth clutched his temples, battling insanity. Some "genius" had waved a wand over Terran history and produced a—

Scrambled World

By BASIL WELLS

THE SUN WAS DYING. About its sullen shadow-streaked red globe thousands of miniature artificial worlds clustered like a swarm of night-chilled midges. So thickly did they hug the great globe of dulling flame that it seemed Sol had acquired an outer husk of interlocked asteroids and moonlets.

Of all the planets and their satellites only Earth remained—a shrunken and changed planet. And Earth too had shifted its orbit until it now swung but a few million miles from its molten primary.

In the huge ovoid of metal that was the *Time Bubble* the three men making up its crew had by now grown accustomed to the changes that three million years had brought to the solar system. They had expected great changes—and found them. This was to be their first stop in their time quest for an efficient shield against the deadly radiations of atomic disintegration's side effects.

Devin Orth, the lean, dark-haired young scientist sharing the control blister with his employer and friend, Norris Horn, studied the expanding green wilderness of what had once been northern Ohio. He turned to the big bald man in whose brain the plans for the time spanner had been born.

"The continents are there," he said unbelieving, "almost exactly as we left them. And yet Earth is smaller. Its diameter has dwindled more than a thousand miles!"

Horn's broad thick body quivered as he loosed a volcanic chuckle.

"I know," he said. "And the oceans, big though they are, are probably very shallow. A thousand feet at the most. Water will be growing precious."

Before Devin could stop firing, the thing leaped clear, yelling.

"But," puzzled Orth, "why are there no cities and why have the continents changed so little? Surely three million years . . ."

"I'd say the inhabitants of those small globes near the sun," suggested Horn, "are descendants of Earthmen. They have used their superb command of science to make of Earth a beautiful park or preserve as it was in our own primitive age.

"Surely, if they have such knowledge, they can give us the secret of atomic control that will overcome the sterility threatening mankind. We cannot return now to the limited culture afforded by the lesser power-sources of coal or gas without great damage to civilization—perhaps its utter downfall."

"They have it all right," said Orth, scowling down at the open parklike meadow toward which Horn was blasting, "but I'm worried about getting back. So far this time travel is simply negation—outside the *Time Bubble* three million years pass and to us it seems less than two hours."

Horn thrummed the landing jets smoothly and laughed his deep booming bellow. The grassy glade came up to meet them.

"A minor detail," he said as he cut the jets and the ship jolted abruptly to an uneven grounding. The deck was slightly tilted and from below there sounded a muffled explosion.

"You all right, Neilson?" shouted Orth into the intercom.

The third member of their crew sounded breathless as he answered from the power compartment.

"Thought the mixer was going for a bit," he gasped. "A forward jet went kaffoo. Boulder maybe blocking off that last blast."

Orth told Horn what Neilson had said. The big man unzipped his safety harness and came over to his side, his big capable hand on Orth's shoulder.

"Don't worry about getting home," he said, taking up the thread of conversation the explosion had disrupted, "In three million years all the secrets of time and matter will have been discovered. 'We'll return with the shield.'"

He released the young scientist's bruised shoulder and slapped a great paw of a hand on his back, pushing him down toward the airlock.

"Better replace that jet tip, Devin," he

said. "Can't tell but we may have to take off in a hurry. This future civilization might be unfriendly and," he paused thoughtfully, "even non-humanoid."

Orth checked the gauges at the lock and found the outer atmosphere to be a heady oxygen-rich mixture. Horn had gone down to help Neilson in the power compartment and he was alone. He stuffed the jet tip into his bag of tools and pushed through the inner port into the airlock. There he snapped on the invisible, but oddly tingling, radiations that would destroy any alien spores of deadly growth that might find their way into the ship.

He swung open the thick oval outer door and dropped the short grounding ladder to the blast-blackened turf. Down the eight rigid metal rungs of the ladder he went to the ground. He stumbled awkwardly and almost fell. The unaccustomed gravity, after the past twelve days in space—twelve days that had actually been thirty thousand centuries—had tricked him.

A moment later his muscles had quickly remedied this unbalance and he found the fused jet that had blown back. As Neilson had guessed, the *Time Bubble* had grazed a boulder in landing and the expanding rocket gases' escape had been blocked off.

It was good to feel the spring of turf underfoot. Even the feeble warmth of the ancient sun was pleasant on his bared flesh. He had not realized how homesick he had grown for Earth until now.

He put down his tools and headed toward a clump of oddly-shaped trees near the forest's rim. As he neared them he whistled. The temperature of the Lakes region must have changed. They were palms!

It was only then that he turned to look back at the *Time Bubble*. He was thinking that Horn would be interested in his discovery of this tropical growth so far north.

His eyes blinked stupidly. He blinked again.

The *Time Bubble's* ugly ovoid of space-scarred metal was gone!

SEVERAL HOURS had passed since the space ship's uncanny disappearance. The Earthman was picking his way along a narrow game trail in the semi-twilight of the mighty forest that crowded close up to Lake Erie's shoreline.

Caution had impelled him to seek safety in the wilderness until the truth about the spacer's disappearance was revealed.

The trail cut across a rock-strewn highway, deeply-rutted by wheeled vehicles. Just across the way, half-hidden by a tangle of wild vines and brush, was a small log cabin. Smoke oozed slowly skyward from its mud-daubed stick chimney.

The odor of cooking meat sent Orth trotting hungrily across the road. He had forgotten any possible danger until an arrow hissed viciously past his ear. He dropped forward on his belly in a shallow depression soggy with dead leaves. A second arrow thwacked lightly through the gray-barked tangle of brush that his head was ramming into.

His fingers went to the flat pocket machine gun that all three scientists aboard the *Time Bubble* carried. This weapon, complete with ten thousand tiny explosive cartridges, and a compact kit of tools and essential equipment, they carried with them at all times when away from the space ship.

Behind a light gray shaft of scaly bark, a huge tree's bole, something red moved. His machine gun slapped a dozen needle-sized slugs at the half-seen target. The explosions splintered and ripped at the tree's thick trunk. The red thing leaped clear, yelling. Before Devin could stop his weapon, it stepped into several small incredibly bright explosions.

Then, from the cabin, a broad-shouldered young man emerged. He was clad somewhat after the fashion of the early American pioneers: fur cap, shapeless brown homespun shirt, rough skinny-legged trousers, and thick-soled moccasins. In his hands he lifted a cumbersome weapon, having six wooden barrels or tubes, from each of which protruded a sharp-pointed metal dart.

"There been trouble?" he cried out in badly mangled but understandable English.

For an instant Orth was stunned by the wonder of it. After three million years—a man speaking English!

"Shot at me from over there," he told the frontiersman warily.

The man catfooted over to the scarred tree, his clumsy weapon poised ready. He grunted something in badly garbled Eng-

lish. Then he motioned to the Earthmen to join him.

"Redskin," he told Orth.

The hairy apelike savage crouching in bloody death behind the tree was indeed clad in flapping, red-dyed garments of skin. His skin, however, was as white beneath its matted covering of black hair as Orth's own. Yet the other had called the savage a redskin.

As Orth watched the tall young giant stamped his foot down on the fallen warrior's middle, shook the long chestnut hair out of his handsome brown face, and opening his mouth let out a prolonged hideous screech. As he did so his fists hammered drumlike on his distended chest.

From the distance a hideous snarling and trumpeting answered the ear-splitting sound. The man grinned at Orth and nodded toward the forest. He stepped down and held up two fingers.

"Vello," he said, continuing to make the V sign that first saw birth in the Second World War. "Me, I am Dun Horgan. Horgan of the wilderness. Those are my friends you hear, the hairy apes of Afri County."

Orth held out his hand. "Shake," he said, "Horgan. I'm named Orth. I hail from Meadville in Pennsylvania."

"Pennsylvania over that way," and Horgan pointed, "but no village that name. Maybe small?"

Orth nodded. "Small," he agreed wryly. After three million years he wondered that the states retained their original names.

Horgan reached down to jerk an intricately woven necklace of hair, from which depended a crudely carved locket of bone, from the fallen savage's neck.

"Scalp locket is worth fifteen bits bounty," he said offering it to Orth. "It is yours."

Orth shook his head. "No, you keep it. I'll trade it for some food and a bed." He eyed the other thoughtfully.

"And some information too," he added.

OVER a well cooked slab of venison and a plate of corn bread, washed down by a muddy brown brew that Horgan served hot and sweetened, they talked. Corn likker the frontiersman called the steaming tasteless fluid when Orth mistakenly named it coffee.

And when they had finished his host produced squares of a fine brown paper which he deftly filled, one-handed, with shredded greenish tobacco, and presented the fat cigar-sized bundles to Orth. He shrugged at the Earthman's refusal, eyeing with amusement the slender whiteness of Orth's own cigarettes.

"Shipped from France maybe," he suggested, "or China?"

Orth handed over the pack. Horgan studied the markings that showed they were manufactured in Kentucky. He shook his head.

"Don't reckon you'll be getting no more," he said. "General Lee ain't been licked yet, and until Washington and Pershing break through to the South . . ." He lifted his big arms in a half-shrug of doubt.

"What's all this about Lee and Pershing? Some sort of Civil War over again? Or is this continent being invaded?"

Horgan eyed the Earthman curiously. "Maybe I'll have to tell you what year it is," he said dryly, "and who's Boss of the States now. You're powerful ignorant, Orth."

"Go ahead," invited Orth. "My memory's fuzzy."

"This's 1927, June the third." Horgan tugged absent-mindedly at his long brown locks. "Our boss now is Tyad Roosfeld. His third year as Boss."

"Teddy Roosevelt." Orth studied his knuckles thoughtfully. "And I suppose General Eisenhower is invading Germany to win our independence!"

"Not Germany," corrected the frontiersman, "but Great Britain. We have accepted Churchill's challenge to land there and fight. Of course the war with Germany and Japan are going on too."

Orth groaned. "What about this other thing—Lee and Washington down South? Don't tell me it's Civil War revival week too. What kind of a gag are you trying to pull on me, Horgan?"

Horgan rubbed a rasping palm thoughtfully along his jaw.

"There is war between the States," he said at last. "Everywhere there is war. The broadcast drums warn us that soon we must fight Cuba." Smoke puffed from his nostrils. "Helping Spain."

One of Orth's hands covered his eyes

and he felt his face growing hot with a mingling of anger and bewilderment. He stuttered as he tried to talk. He swallowed smoke and coughed, choking.

"Good afternoon," called a fresh young voice, a feminine voice, from the cabin's rude door.

THEIR heads twisted smartly toward the opening. Horgan's bared sword was in his fist even before he was on his feet. Together they stood facing the tall round-bodied woman who had walked in upon them. Despite her stature she was remarkably beautiful.

She was pale of skin and her great mass of intricately braided hair was of a softly radiant silver hue. The simple garment of golden-hued cloth covered her adequately—but no more than that. Even her sandals were simple, accessories of comfort and utility rather than fashion.

"I am Ayna of Globe 64BA," she told them briskly. "I wish one or both of you to escort me to Ivath's headquarters."

She was eyeing Orth's zippered shirt and glassid trousers curiously.

"Ivath must be slipping," she said. "You are definitely out of the wrong century. More likely the Twenty-first. I cannot be mistaken for I have majored in Ancient American Mythology."

"I was born in 1960!" Orth snapped, and "I definitely must be in the wrong century. Or I'm out of my head! That's more like it. All this pother about the Civil War and the World Wars going on at the same time. Maybe just the names are the same. Or—what?"

"There must be a short circuiting of your memory cells," said Ayna soothingly, "but Ivath and his helpers will soon set that right. Take me to him and I will help you." She looked at Horgan.

Horgan was shaking his head. "Sorry," he said, "but until the Civil War is ended—here I stay."

The girl frowned. She turned to Orth. "How about you?" she demanded. "Are you part of the local scenery too, or can you travel?"

"I have no idea what this is all about," Orth told her, "but I go where I please. Maybe you can set me right on a few things, Ayna. Then I'll go along with you."

"Fine!" Her teeth flashed.

"I can go with you to Hardpan City," Dun Horgan said slowly. "That's where I trade off my furs and gold dust. We can thump a ride on one of the wagons going to New Yok."

"What are we waiting for then?" demanded Ayna. "Bring extra slugs for your six guns." She looked at Orth. "Don't you have a gun?"

Orth tugged out his compact machine pistol. Apparently the clumsy spring-powered weapons with six barrels were what the girl called six guns, for Horgan belted a second weapon around his waist. The girl examined his hand gun with curious eyes and fingers.

"Unusual design," she commented. "Not authentic for your period costume."

"Come along," said Horgan, cutting across Orth's protesting words. "About time for the afternoon wagon train."

HERE THEY COME!" cried Horgan as they quitted the path for the rutted highway.

He seized a long length of pole and started beating at the road with it. Dust clouded up about them. And further down the road a growing cloud of dust neared. These must be the wagons Horgan was going to hail, Orth decided.

"Why is he pounding the ground, Ayna?" demanded Orth.

The woman laughed. "He is thumping for a ride," she explained. "It is a peculiar custom of this age. In this way he asks assistance."

Orth's dark face reddened with sudden mirth that he choked back. The twisted idiomatic expressions of this strange world were taking a familiar pattern. Even the scrambled pattern of wars and their military leaders began to make sense. *Thumping* a ride, six shooters, and scalp *lockets* linked up with Ayna's reference to Ancient American Mythology.

"You're from the little globes clustering around the sun," he said, "and you were visiting Earth—or this primitive duplication of it. Sort of a park for your people, this. Your spacer crashed or you've lost it."

Ayna frowned at Orth. "Yes," she said slowly, "I landed on Earth, contrary to the regulations, and a herd of mammoths wrecked my ship. But how could you, a

creature of Ivath's great workshop, know anything of spacers?"

"I do not know Ivath," Orth said angrily, "and I came here in a spacer that has vanished . . . Now, how do we get out of this make believe world of yours to your home?"

"But this is real," the girl protested. "If a redskin's arrow or a tearunner's slug cuts you down you will die. Until the war is ended, or you take me to Ivath's headquarters, we are not safe."

"All I can say is human beings are as crazy as they were three million years ago," grunted Orth.

Meanwhile the dust cloud rolled closer and slowed. Horgan's thumping had halted them. Orth saw three great wagons, their twenty foot-high metal-tired wheels fitting deep down into the rutted way.

Sixty feet in length they were, and beneath a low roof, that Ayna called a hood, there was a broad treadmill geared up with the eight huge wheels. Between eighty and a hundred thick-bodied little ponies were tied upon this raised moving belt. Above the hood lifted a sort of tower, its roof twenty feet above the ground, and here the two wagon drivers sat, steering the cumbersome vehicle with a spoked wooden wheel.

Back of the cab was the covered cargo deck of the wagon where bags of grain, hides and other produce were heaped.

One of the wooden blocks that had braked the enormous wheels was smoking and now it burst into flame. One of the drivers hastily tossed a bucket of water on the block and put it out.

"Going through Hardpan City?" Horgan asked.

"Climb aboard," cheerfully answered a runty driver with a huge dusty red moustache. He jabbed his thumb at the ladder bolted to the wagon's side.

"You ride this waggon," Horgan said to Ayna and Orth. "I'll hop the next one."

The red-moustached man helped them into the cab, his squinted pale eyes studying the girl appreciatively, and then he spoke to his hulking companion. This driver was a hairy apish giant without ears. Now he slowly released the brakes that locked the treadmill while Red Moustache freed the wheels.

The treadmill revolved faster and faster and they went clanking and bumping off down the highroad, the miniature horses sweating in their involuntary struggle to keep on their feet. The great hooded vehicle had a pace of perhaps ten miles an hour.

"I hear," shouted the little driver at Orth and Ayna, "that the Boss is sending a hundred men to New York soon. They're to hunt down the red jitterbugs and out-laws that range the highways."

He paused long enough to catch his breath and curse the thick fog of dust that filled the cab.

"A hundred soldiers to wipe out three or four thousand tea sellers and their gunmen!" He snorted. "Of course they're jeep men—Hoovers, you know—but they can't do any good."

"The Boss is all wise," said the earless man, bumping his clenched fist against his nose. "He is the Boss."

Orth turned to Ayna. "Now," he said, "who is Ivath?"

The girl shrugged. "For a creation of Ivath's laboratories," she said, "you are refreshingly human. So I will treat you as one of us." Her eyes were thoughtful. "After all a robot does possess a limited power of reasoning."

"Ivath!" Orth barked the word at her. "Forget the insults for the time being. I may look funny but I'm human."

"Ivath is the director of our theater of space," she said. "This, as you know, is a huge hollow globe on whose surface world-wide dramas from the ages past are brought to life. He is painstakingly accurate in his depiction of the bygone dress, customs and speech."

Orth laughed shortly. "Even to vehicles with horses for power," he said, "and guns without gunpowder."

The girl disregarded him. "But Ivath has surpassed other directors of the past. He uses androids, living robots, and impresses on their memory cells the accurate thought and instinct patterns of their own chosen age. It is really amazing how closely their actions follow the historical patterns of the ancient past."

"You mean he sprinkles cities, forests and—robots, all around and watches what happens? No script for them to follow? No deadline or time to end it all?"

"He usually changes the entire surface of the globe every fifty years," Ayna told him. "The next drama will be that of ancient Mars before the Earthmen came, and shortly afterward."

"If it is as accurate as this mess," said Orth dryly, "it will be something to see, and worse to hear. I lived in the years of the first Martian exploration, Ayna. And I came from the Twentieth Century that your director is supposed to be presenting here!"

Ayna's face was serious. Orth felt a curious prickling sensation in his head and then everything went hazy for a time...

Eventually the blur faded. He found that they had left the forest behind and were entering a region of cultivated fields and little huddles of log and sod dwellings. The clumsy vehicle in which they sat was slowing until it was barely crawling between two rows of brick-fronted cabins.

"You are not lying," Ayna said. "I probed your mind, Devin Orth. You are not an android. And I believe that your space ship has been seized by Ivath. It was an alien object on the vast canvas of his pictured world."

"Here's Hardpan," Red Moustache said, leering slack-jawed at Ayna. "Sorry you couldn't go along to New York," he added to Orth, "you and your squirt. She's some fowl."

Orth choked and gulped twice. He thanked the driver and climbed down the ladder. Horgan was already standing in the shadow of a doorway above which swung a dust-grimed sign. *Two Drink Tony's*, the sign read.

"Wait for us in that store," said Horgan, pointing out a door across the street that was flanked by barrels of fruit and other produce. "Orth and me needs a drink."

Orth started to protest and then desisted as he saw the girl's eyelid twitch and her head motion toward the door. He followed the frontiersman. Ayna was talking softly to herself as they left her.

THEY JOINED THE men bellied up to the bar. Dun Horgan ordered two shots of alcohol which were brought to them in shallow saucers of glass. Horgan dropped three bits on the bar.

"How about a shot of tea?" he whispered to the bartender.

The man's flabby pink face whitened. Imperceptibly he nodded toward the back room and scooped up the three shining coins. The two men downed their fiery drinks and then elbowed their way toward the closed door.

"It's this accursed Volsad Law," said Horgan. "All a result of the Boston tea runners. Tried to smuggle it in and then the reform crowd took it up. Blamed tea for crime and poverty. Pushed the laws through outlawing its sale."

Orth grinned. "So now the bootleggers, or tealeggers, maybe, are getting rich."

Horgan nodded. Inside the door the bartender met them and slipped a small bottle of cold tea into Horgan's pocket. Then he motioned toward the half-open door leading into the alley beyond.

"Please," he said. "There may be jeep men watching my bar."

They quitted the building and leaving the alley reached the main street. Ayna was waiting in the store's door and as she saw them she started to walk in their direction.

A bony stoop-shouldered man with a naked skull beneath his droopy-brimmed hat lurched into her path. His sunken dark eyes were bloodshot and hot. He jerked her arm.

"Looking for someone?" he demanded. "I'm here."

Ayna's fist landed flush on the man's jaw. He staggered back, but still gripped her. Orth seized the man's shoulder and spun him about. With the same movement his other fist crashed the bony man backward for several paces.

BUT he had not been alone. With him were three other hard-faced men. They helped him to his feet and came pacing toward Orth and Horgan. Their hands were inching down toward their big holstered spring guns. Orth reached for his own hand machine gun, and with his movement their four enemies went for their own weapons.

Horgan was slapping his bolts at the quartet. Ayna was hugging the dirty street. Orth felt one smashing impact before his weapon started sewing the explosive little pellets across the four men's middles. Pain was just starting to throb in his left elbow when the last of the others slumped,

dead, into the dusty street. Horgan staggered toward him, a six gun bolt in his right side.

"Just nicked me," he said calmly, his hand holding back the blood that seeped through his coarse-woven shirt.

Orth found it hard to believe that these fallen men were actually but pseudo-men, robots. Their laboratory-given life blood was as red and sticky as a true man's, and their dying struggles were as realistic as his own might have been.

The bartender came sidling up to Orth. He was but one of a score of muttering, staring onlookers.

"Better clear outta town," he advised. "Krepp's brother is sheriff. And if he don't hang you Krepp's mob will do you up."

"Thanks," Orth said. There were a dozen horses, saddled and bridled, drooping at a nearby hitchrail, and toward these he moved.

"Come on," he told Horgan and Ayna. "We're riding out of here."

Horgan shrugged. "Might as well get neckties for rustling a horse as for killing Krepp," he conceded, reloading his two spring guns.

They climbed into the saddles, Orth snapping a warning burst of explosive slugs into the road and Horgan menacing the glowering knot of townspeople and riders, and went riding eastward out of the village street.

Once they were free of the town and climbing a long easy grade into the low tree-clad hills the men of Hardpan City, organized their pursuit. Orth saw horses, light wagons, and high-wheeled vehicles resembling bicycles come streaming up the highway after them.

Drums began to boom all along the cleared valley they had left and in the hills ahead.

"News broadcasters," Horgan informed him, "warning all cruising scout waggons and squad carts of our escape. Their squad carts are fast—they have pulley drives that can be shifted. If we can only reach the forests again..."

"We'll make it," Orth said. He grinned encouragingly at Ayna. "Maybe we'll find your precious Ivath, too," he added.

At that moment they were riding up a short grade, tree-lined and stony, beyond

which they could see nothing but an endless stretch of undulating tree-tops. Nothing, Orth was thinking, could now keep them from achieving safety.

Suddenly the ground swayed underfoot and their horses spilled them from the saddles.

THERE was a moment of rushing blackness, as though they were falling into a pit of tar, and then they felt themselves being whirled horizontally along for a time into a blurring twilight, only to slide softly to a stop.

Orth heard a click and a whir from somewhere above him and saw a vast square section of grayness detach itself from the sky above and disappear. He lay quietly for a long minute but the ground was solid underfoot and so he stood up.

"That," said Ayna, laughing rather breathlessly, "was some of Ivath's work. He's brought this section of the crust inside for repairs." She hesitated. "Or perhaps because of you, Devin Orth."

"Me? I get it. If he took the *Time Bubble* this same way... Yeah."

Orth swallowed thickly. No telling what the mysterious Ivath might be planning to do with them. He was glad Ayna was along. She knew this insane future world.

"Here he comes now," said Ayna, low-voiced. "Ivath, I mean. And, by the way, he is my great grandfather. So don't mind him too much."

Orth found himself looking at a transparent bubble of plastic with a puffy oversized belt of jade-green metal fixed about its middle. It floated a few feet above the ground, sparks buzzing faintly as it dropped too low and was forced upward again.

Inside there was a bony little parody of a man's body, or rather, its upper torso. Below the arms there was nothing save a shining metallic cylinder. The huge blue-veined skull was supported by soft wide bands of plastic material, and the bony arms rested on cushioned ledges.

"Greetings, Earthman," something inside his brain seemed to say. "I have your fellows here, my honored guests. You will join them."

"They are here, my companions?" asked Orth stupidly. "You mean Horn and Neilson? Did you say that to me?"

"He speaks only in thoughts," said Ayna. "When our people reach the age of two hundred they submit to this operation. With their lungs gone there is, of course, no vocal speech. But we live on for centuries untroubled by bodily breakdowns."

Ivath motioned with his feeble old arms. "Come," he flashed at them, "we will join them."

AS THEY sat in a small spacer cruising within the vast hollow of Ivath's world-sized stage, Ayna explained more of the mysteries of this future world. How the planets had been cut up into smaller spheres and moved into the dwindling radiations of Sol. How their fleets of space ships crossed the void to trade and mine the precious elements they required, and of the other galactic cultures they met.

"It is sad," said the girl at last, "that you can never return to the past. It is there that our science has utterly failed. Travel in time is but a one-way voyage."

"You mean, Ayna," Orth said slowly, "we can't carry back the knowledge of an atomic shield that will arrest the spread of sterility—that mankind must abandon his use of atomic power?"

"You cannot go back," smiled Ayna, putting her hand on his shoulder as she spoke. "But there is no need. In 1980—if our records are not too wrong—Eric Ensamoff discovered such a shield."

"Great!" cried Orth. "I won't mind being stranded here. There's Ivath to set right on his ancient history. There's your perfected civilization to study." He swallowed his tongue momentarily and recovered it.

"And then there's you, Ayna," he blurted. "You're..."

The girl slid her fingers across a toggle-switch in the wall. "No use letting all the worlds hear us," she said softly, "much less see us. You see, I was sent to interview you and get your reactions. All the world was watching while you explored."

Orth took the girl and pulled her closer. He studied her face. She smiled.

"Sure it's turned off?" he demanded. She nodded.

"Fine...no, they don't need to see *this* reaction..."

FINAL GLORY

By HENRY HASSE

Illustrated by SCHECTMAN



They saw a patch of light against the reddish sunglow.

The Sun was dying—and with it the System. Earth was a cold stone. Survivors huddled on a cheerless Mercury, waiting numbly. But Praav in his inscrutable wisdom—

N'ZIK was a forlorn and weary figure at the forward port. He balanced his frail, bulbous body on four of his eight limbs, while the other four moved listlessly over the etherscope, adjusting sights and lenses. N'Zik wondered dully why he bothered. Even from here he could see that the system looking ahead, the dull reddish Sun with its wild and darksome planets, was not for them.

Bitterness flooded his soul. To have come so far and searched so long, only to find this! In all this Galaxy here was the one Sun that sustained a planetary system, and that Sun was dying! The irony was more than he could bear.

Shi-Zik came to stand beside him. Only she and N'Zik were left, of all the thousands; two alone on this driving colossus which was the only world they had ever

known. She sensed his bitterness now and tried to speak words of hope.

"See, N'Zik, there are inner planets! How close their orbits are! There may still be warmth and life-sustaining rays."

N'Zik's limbs sprawled outward in despair.

"This dying system is not for us, Shi-Zik. The five largest and outermost planets are but barren, frigid rock. But if you wish, we shall go inward."

His limbs flashed over the huge control-console. Gradually the ship slowed in its headlong pace. Nearly the size of a small planet, was this ship; entire generations had been born and died aboard it, during the trip between Galaxies. Somewhere deep inside, perpetual generators pounded out the power that had driven them through space faster than light.

N'Zik and Shi-Zik had never seen those generators, nor were they conscious now of the smooth threnody. They had known it always. Miles of inter-locking corridors extended behind them too, a veritable city with vast rooms of wonderful machinery—but none of this had they ever seen. For DEATH had struck suddenly there, was lurking there still.

The huge metal tomes told of it. N'Zik and Shi-Zik had read that history so often that they knew it now by heart. They knew how and why the last generations had been wiped out.

THE first scientists had planned well for the safety and well-being of the generations to come, but they had overlooked one thing. Within their own Galaxy they had been cognizant of certain cosmic rays, which were harmless insofar as they had no apparent effect on living tissues. However, in that utter vacuity between Galaxies *no such rays existed!* And there between Galaxies new generations were born. Five, ten, a dozen generations. And at last—they had reached the new Galaxy...

Whether the cosmic rays here differed, or whether the new generations had simply lost all resistance to them, was never fully known. The race had died by thousands as the hard rays penetrated the ship. The scientists worked feverishly to build up a section with layers of their heaviest metals; but by the time they had achieved a sufficient thickness, a few dozen had survived.

N'Zik and Shi-Zik were the last of that final group.

Now, under N'Zik's sure guidance, the ship crossed the orbits of the outer planets. He had thrown over the deceleration control, but their speed was still tremendous.

In a few minutes craggy fragments of rock were skimming past their hull. The larger ones were deflected by automatic repulsion plates and the few that drifted through became molten upon contact. Such was their speed.

Then they were through the swarm, and N'Zik remarked, "This is an old system indeed. At one time a planet must have occupied that orbit."

"Look." Shi-Zik's spider-like body was taut with eagerness as she pointed to a planet far ahead, swinging away from their trajectory. "Shall we follow it?"

"There is no purpose. We can pick it up in the etherscope." N'Zik adjusted the sights. The planet together with its two moons leaped into view on the screen. N'Zik manipulated the magnilens and it was brought still nearer.

Vast icy caps encompassed most of this world. The rest was frozen desert, slightly reddish, with a few peculiar straight-line markings that might have been man-made. But that didn't interest them now. It was all too apparent that this planet had been uninhabitable for millenia.

"Dead. A frozen, dead world," Shi-Zik intoned. "Let us go on to the next one."

They moved ever inward. The next planet with its single satellite offered no more promise. Here they saw stark mountain ranges in contrast to vast hollows that might have been dead ocean bottoms. The magnilens picked out several cities, tottering, crumbling in ruin.

"Cities," N'Zik muttered. "Cities still standing on this airless world. A civilization once existed here, and it cannot have been so long ago. Shall we go on, Shi-Zik? There are two or three other planets but I fear they will offer no more than this."

Now something of N'Zik's despair came upon Shi-Zik. "No, we need not go on. I feel weary of it all. I care not if we ever find the place we seek."

"I too, have had this feeling," N'Zik waved his limbs in agreement. "Shi-Zik,

we have searched this Galaxy through. There may yet be life-giving Suns with planets, but we have not much time. Of late I have felt the engines becoming sluggish of power..."

"True. The way has been long." She gestured hopelessly. "Do you suggest then, that we put an end to the mission?"

"Not without your consent, Shi-Zik."

"I have wanted to end it!" Shi-Zik cried. "For a very long time I have thought of it, but dared not speak."

"And yet," N'Zik mused, "perhaps we should search further. Search until the end. It was the will of our forbears that the race be continued. Should we end so ingloriously what they set out to achieve?"

"The will of our forebears is as nothing to the will of Praav," Shi-Zik spoke softly, gazing out to the stars. "Praav has watched safely over us all this time. If He had wanted us to find a place, we should have found it. And we need not end ingloriously. Observe, N'Zik, that we, the last of our kind, have ended here, at what is probably the last planetary system. Its sun is dying as our race is dying. Let us all go out in a final flame together, a blaze of glory!"

The bitterness had left N'Zik now. "You are right, my dear. It was meant that we should end here. I believe Praav has willed it so!"

He threw the controls over to full acceleration and locked them into place. The colossus of all spaceships piled acceleration upon acceleration with the speed of light, plunging on its unerring course toward the dying Sun. The two beings from another Galaxy stood at the forward port, proudly side by side. N'Zik looked at Shi-Zik and felt such a peace as he had never known.

And Shi-Zik murmured, "Praav, in his inscrutable wisdom..."

CURT SANDERS climbed wearily up the last steep passage from the city below. Space-suited and helmeted, he emerged from the low line of cliffs and looked out upon the desolate surface of Mercury.

For the past week he had worked hard in the underground laboratories. Occasionally he came to the surface where he could see the dark sky, and the pin-points

of stars, and the dying Sun once more. That alone gave him incentive to go on. He, with the several thousand others, were working out the problem which might save them from extinction. It was slow work, damnably slow and hard, and Curt knew in his heart they would not be in time.

He raised his face to the red orb whose heat scarcely touched here. Again he marvelled that disaster had come so suddenly. Solar radiation was not supposed to end like that! It should have gone on for millennia. That's what the scientists had preached. But it had ended—scarcely five hundred years ago. Curt had never known Earth, only the city here far within Mercury, where there was meager warmth and light. And now even the internal heat of Mercury was fast cooling.

Curt turned at the sound of footsteps behind him. That would be Olana. She, too, came here each week.

She stopped beside him, raised her helmeted face to Sun and stars with infinite longing. For a moment neither of them spoke. Then Olana clicked on her helmet radio.

"Each time, Curt...each time I come here I imagine the Sun has grown dimmer. Is it really only my imagination?"

"Yes. It becomes dimmer, but not perceptibly. Solar radiation is electronic, and the theory is that our Sun has merely exhausted an outer sheath of electrons. Lord knows what internal condition caused it! If it's a solid body, it may be due to certain peculiarities of the strata. The sun spots of hundreds of years ago must have been the beginning of the end."

She nodded. "How is the work coming?"

"The Traction Rays? Slowly, Olana—too slowly." Curt shook his head in weariness. "We're in the process of testing, but they are still not strong enough. It means months more of work, and we shall need hundreds! You know, if we fail on the first attempt we shall not have another chance."

"I—I still don't quite understand it," Olana was puzzled. "I know it has something to do with the orbit of Vulcan. But how can it save us?"

"It may not. It's a forlorn chance. You know of course that Vulcan's a very small

planet, scarcely larger than Earth's moon. And it pursues an orbit much closer to the Sun than Mercury. If we can drive it out of its orbit with the Traction Rays, it may fall into the Sun!"

"But suppose," Olana pointed out, "it only takes up a closer orbit?"

"Exactly why we're taking no chances. We must be sure our rays are strong enough to *propel* it into the Sun."

"And what then?"

Curt shrugged. "After that it's anybody's guess. Professor Marston believes that such a collision will set up a combustion sufficient to release internal electronic action from the Sun's depths. And, once that is started, the Sun will blaze again."

"I see," Olana exclaimed. "Something like stirring up dying embers!"

"Yes." There was no eagerness in Curt's voice. "No doubt there are forces within the Sun sufficient to last for millennia, if they could only be released. But they must be deep within. I'm afraid nothing we do with Vulcan will be enough."

"Why, you're just a pessimist!"

Curt smiled wanly. "No, just realistic. And very tired! It's been a trying week. Come, we'd better be getting back."

"Wait." Olana stopped him. She was gazing at the blackness beyond the horizon's rim. "Curt, look."

"Meteor?" He followed her gaze. "No! I never saw a meteor like *that*!"

They saw a patch of light against the reddish sunglow. It wasn't extended light, it seemed to move as a bulk and with such speed as no meteor had ever attained. For half a minute they watched it become smaller—then it disappeared. Curt shook his head in puzzlement.

"That beats me! For a minute I had a feeling—yes, I was *right*! It went straight into the Sun! Olana—I!"

But she had seen, too. She was scarcely aware of Curt's fierce grip on her arm.

DIRECTLY in the center of the maroon Sun a tiny pinpoint of white had appeared. Even as they watched, it seemed to mushroom slowly outward.

"That was no meteor!" Curt exclaimed. "Whatever caused that explosion was travelling at the speed of light, and must have had tremendous bulk! Why...I doubt if even Vulcan striking with its orbital velocity could cause such a display!"

For an hour they watched. At the end of that time the whitish glow had given no sign of receding; if anything, it had become ever so slightly larger. They stared, entranced with a new hope.

At last Olana placed a hand on Curt's arm and murmured, "God, in his inscrutable wisdom..."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933 of PLANET STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1946.

State of New York County of New York, ss.: Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Paul L. Payne, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of PLANET STORIES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc. of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Company, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Paul L. Payne, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Love Romances Publishing Company, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

(Signed) PAUL L. PAYNE,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1946.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1948.)



A snarling growl echoed through the cave.

ATAVISM

By **ERIK FENNEL**

Illustrated by PREZIO

Bombs crashed. Ack-ack hammered. Gunnar and Martha crouched in a cave, slowly starving, grimly preferring death to capture. What a time for a Martian to visit Earth!

THE AMPHIBIOUS FORCE moved in with big guns ready, with rockets and flame throwers and LCI's and LCT's and planes and thousands of combat-hardened men, expecting to shoot the works against the fog-shrouded little island that might have held the northern key to invasion.

The men were all tensely expectant. All, that is, except the nurse and the Air Force radioman whom one of the LCT's

had picked up en route, drifting in a rubber life raft. But their apparent indifference to the impending battle aroused little comment. The task force had its own problems to consider, and that pair had already had it rugged. Their plane, they said, had been shot down weeks before and they'd been dodging Japs ever since.

When the ramp of the first landing craft grated on the gravel and word went

back to the waiting ships that the battle was off, that the Japs for some unknown reason of their own had pulled out without even pausing to destroy their equipment, the nurse and the radioman seemed as calm as though it were what they had expected it all along. But in the excitement over the startling new development their peculiar behavior was overlooked. They didn't complain, for they had no desire to do any more lying than necessary...

...Yark was a Great Brain. Even the more advanced embryos were conscious of his revered status. But his three eyes blinked in rotation—a sure sign of pleasure in a Martian—and in the pleasure of addressing the most distinguished Martians from every field of endeavor his outlines wavered and grew dim. For seconds at a time he *thinned out* almost to transparency.

He addressed the gathering orally, though of course all present were sufficiently advanced for direct brain-to-brain communication. Yark fancied himself as an orator—the one atavistic trait he consciously allowed himself—and mental contact did not allow the little frills of speech-making.

"The outer hull of the spaceship is made of oxides," he declared, "because the planet selected for initial exploration has an unconscionable amount of oxygen in its atmosphere, and oxides will not oxidize."

Mental applause resounded through the great Hall. This was excellent Martian logic.

"Construction of the vessel was relatively simple. The great problem lay in developing a life form which could withstand the rigors of the journey.

"What sets us apart from the lower forms of life?"

The question was purely rhetorical. Every Martian knew it was the ability to change form at will.

"This trait is of course due to superior mental ability and training. But even for us there has been a definite limitation, caused of course by residual atavisms... atavisms which we must, and some day will, extirpate completely from our glorious race."

Excitement overcame his mental control and for a moment he became completely

invisible. He frowned mentally as he caught a tittering reaction from some individual in the audience. Invisibility, too, was an aspect of shape adaptation, of superiority, though because it no longer served a useful purpose it had come to be regarded with suspicion as an atavistic trait. This was particularly true of the involuntary invisibility which sometimes accompanied high emotional tension. A powerful and growing school of thought even considered emotions themselves as atavisms.

A human audience would have fidgeted as Yark recounted in minutest detail the processes by which Erg, to whom had been granted the honor of becoming the first Martian to visit another planet, had been reduced to the lowest common denominator of Martian consciousness, a mass of specialized but undifferentiated cells. And Yark, Yark of the Council of Great Brains, had been in charge since the very earliest stages of Erg's embryohood.

"This reduction," Yark declared, "has been possible only by complete elimination of all atavistic traits. Even latent ones." He told with obvious satisfaction of Erg's unprecedented perfect zero score on the famous Yark Anti-Atavism Test.

"Erg will remain in full telepathic contact with me," the Great Brain continued. "Immediately following the landing there will be a period of quiescence, necessary to allow Erg to adjust himself to his new environment. During this period he will be able to gather and retransmit mental impressions from any intelligent creatures nearby — providing of course any such creatures exist upon this barbarously un-Martian planet—but his individuality will remain passive.

"Following the period of quiescence, differentiation of cells will take place. Erg will then be a full-fledged Martian and will explore the entire planet. After that, who knows what vistas of greatness lie ahead?"

"In his present form only I, his mentor and creator, can retain contact. But you honored Martians will be allowed to become attuned to my brain and thus receive Erg's reports."

He paused and held aloft a transparent cylinder. The Martians stirred with interest. They were all greatly impressed, although Erg resembled nothing so much

as a pot roast in a jar. They had never heard of a pot roast.

"We shall now dispatch Erg upon his epochal journey."

GUNNAR VIBORG paced restlessly to keep warm, kicking irritably at the pile of mouldy straw in the back of the cave and the deflated life raft from which they had sneaked ashore the night after their plane had been shot down at sea.

"Martha," he said, "this is no good. If we don't get food now, tonight, we'll be too weak if we ever do get a chance for a getaway. I say, let's make a grab now and take our chances afterward. How about it?"

The nurse, her attractive face now pinched with cold and hunger, nodded. Both were well aware that a raid on a Jap supply cache would start an intensive search, but hunger and desperation are companions.

They checked their pistols, their only weapons except Gunnar's trench knife, and started out. They had already chosen their objective, but were only halfway there when the raid began. Probing searchlight beams broke futilely against the hovering clouds and the night rocked with falling bombs and the insane yammer of anti-aircraft fire.

One raid more or less meant little in their situation and, even while they crouched between two huge boulders, Gunnar kept remembering that wonderful restaurant in his Minnesota home town, its strong black coffee and thick steaks and beautiful apple pie.

"Quit that, stomach!" he told himself.

The raid seemed to have ended and they were moving on again when, without warning, the night was shattered by a blue flash somewhere above. The glare penetrated even the blanketing fog and for an instant left the island starkly outlined in a brilliance exceeding daylight. Instantly the ack-ack resumed its uproar, firing blindly. A thousand freight trains seemed to rumble by overhead.

Then a ball-shaped object, emitting a dying trail of flame, whistled out of the overcast like a gigantic bomb. Sparks flashed from a rock as it struck and re-

bounded. It bounced again and came tumbling down the hill, clanging against boulders, hissing and steaming with its own heat as it encountered patches of snow.

"What—what the hell is it?" Martha whispered.

"Some sort of rocket plane. I didn't know we had anything like that."

Gunnar ran forward to investigate as it came to rest near them. It was metal, but battered completely beyond recognition. Part of it was ripped and torn as though by a shell.

"Let's get out of here," Martha urged as Gunnar probed the wreckage. "The Japs are coming."

Gunnar prodded once more at a loosened section, which swung aside to disclose a padded compartment. The transparent cylindrical container he hauled out was scorched but unbroken.

"Let's go!" Martha pleaded.

They had to endure an eternity of anxious waiting, huddled in a snowbank while a Nip patrol went by. Gunnar held on to his loot. He had gotten one glimpse of the contents, and it looked like food.

Their clothing was soaked melted snow and sweat when at last they regained the comparative safety of their cave.

Gunnar had trouble with the container. The fastenings refused to unfasten.

"Quit stalling," Martha complained. "I'm hungry."

Finally Gunnar smashed the thing open with a chunk of rock and hacked off a couple of pieces with his trench knife. The meat resembled an outstandingly low grade of Spam, interspersed with bits of gristle that made tough chewing, and it had a strong gamey taste.

"Not American," Gunnar remarked.

"Some kind of *ersatz*, probably Jap," Martha commented between bites. They were too hungry to be choosy.

A sound from the cave's mouth interrupted their meal. Gunnar gripped his trench knife and pistol as he moved stealthily forward. Then he laughed.

"What is it?" Martha inquired, her gun ready, too.

The half-breed husky growled again, sniffed hungrily and entered the cave snarling. Old scars and new gashes in his flea-bitten hide showed his familiarity with the ways of Jap soldiery.

"One of the dogs the Aleuts left behind when the Japs drove them out," Gunnar said.

He threw a small chunk of gristle. The dog cowered at the motion but darted forward as the piece fell and wolfed it down without chewing.

"Here you are, pooch," Gunnar called.

"Why, he's starved," Martha observed.

Gunnar held more meat in his hand and backed into the cave. The dog followed, wagging his stumpy tail, all growling and menace forgotten as he found the humans friendly.

"We can't let him live," he said reluctantly as the dog accepted the food from his hand. "He'd run in and out and lead the Japs here."

"I guess you're right," the nurse agreed, "But—"

Gunnar picked up his knife, but the dog chose that moment to lick his wrist with a rough, wet tongue, place one paw on his knee and look up inquiringly. Gunnar extended it toward Martha. "Here, you do it. I can't."

She made no move to take the weapon. "I can't, either. He trusts us."

She yawned. A few seconds later he did likewise. Then the dog yawned, too. Gunnar fought another yawn.

"Something — aagh—wrong—aangh—with that meat!" he cried, sudden alarm struggling with drowsiness. "I feel doped!"

DROWSINESS WON. He leaned back against the straw in the darkness and closed his eyes.

Martha's eyelids were heavy but she was still a nurse. She shook him violently. "Sleep in those wet clothes and you'll wake up with pneumonia. Get them off!" she ordered.

Dizzily they undressed in the blackness, wringing out their sopping clothing and hanging it on projecting points of rock in the cave. Before they finished the dog was snoring loudly in the straw.

Martha felt silly and lightheaded. "Gunnar," she said. "Let's call him Frankie. He sings." She giggled.

Then she yawned once more, burrowed into the straw and was sound asleep.

Gunnar had just time to place the two guns and his knife nearby before he too lost consciousness...

...Heat. Cold. Heat again. Violent motion. A ripping shock. The sensations would have been excruciatingly painful to any Martian still possessed of anything so atavistic as a pain sense.

Motion impulses were replaced by vague manifestations of the presence of alien life forms nearby. Two units of alien life. Sensations of Erg becoming the center of some unintelligible, barbaric scene of jubilation, as though he were being received with great joy.

Yark was mildly surprised. Life on this distant planet had evolved further than he had anticipated. The ceremony was confusing, but at least those organisms had developed sufficiently to recognize Erg's inherent superiority and to receive him accordingly.

Rapidly the jubilation died away. Erg was entering the stage of total quiescence, and evidently these alien creatures had quiescent periods too.

The flow of thought impulses ceased and the assembly waited, members gossiping mentally while Yark kept his brain receptive.

Time passed, and suddenly an inaudible scream of mental anguish was ripped from Yark's brain before he could repress it. The assembly came to instant attention, all mental-small talk forgotten.

Yark writhed. Differentiation had begun—but what differentiation! Erg, the incomparable Erg, the most carefully normalized of all Martian personalities—had suddenly developed advanced multiple schizophrenia. He had split into three personalities, two disgustingly atavistic, while the third—ugh! That one was indescribably horrid. Yark had just time to distinguish between the three when their thought trains impinged on his brain, all three at once.

Yark's brain was shaken to its very foundations by the intensity of their un-Martian confusion. Fear and anger and snarling hatred and despair and the nearness of deadly peril and the desire to do something to protect something else, emotions which Yark had never encountered in the entire span of his existence, all swirled through his mind at once in sickening profusion.

Erg, pure, beautiful, perfect, non-atavistic Erg, thinking such black and unenlightened emotion-thoughts!

Yark was outraged, nonplussed and confounded by Erg's incontrovertible symptoms of atavistic schizophrenia. Once more his mind registered a mental titter, this time from more than one member of the audience...

...Gunnar reached out to quiet the growling dog, but Frankie was gone. Instead his hand encountered Martha's and he gave it a reassuring squeeze. He listened, hardly breathing.

From just outside the cave came the peculiar faint sound made only by split-toed Japanese shoes.

"This is it," he whispered as he pressed Martha's pistol into her hand. "They've found us. Better save one shot for yourself."

Flashlights glimmered around the bend of the cave and the clothing hanging from the rocks shuddered and fell as a burst of Nambu fire roared. A Jap ran toward the huddled garments, chattering wildly.

Gunnar knew they could hope only to take as many Nips as possible with them. Even as he opened fire he could hear Martha's pistol start up beside him. The first Japs went down.

Then his pistol clicked empty.

"Just one more," Gunnar prayed as he threw the useless weapon into the nearest yellow face and drew his knife for a final charge.

HE EXPECTED to be met by a burst of fire as he stepped out, but the bullets did not come. Instead a Jap tripped and kicked at something near his feet, then tumbled violently backward with his hands coming up as though to protect his face. The Jap started to scream but stopped abruptly as blood spurted from a throat suddenly raw and mangled. A snarling growl echoed through the cave.

Another Nip went down, struggling with something invisible.

Panic gripped the Jap patrol. Two surviving soldiers broke and ran, but the lieutenant in charge snatched up a gun. Bullets whined off the rocks as he fired wildly, without a target.

All at once Frankie lay in the middle of the floor, his spine shattered by a chance bullet but his fangs still bared in a snarl of defiance. The Jap kicked at the

dog, then jumped aside and stared unbelievably as his outlines blurred momentarily. He kicked again with deliberate brutality, and the dog gave one convulsive shudder and lay still.

Without conscious volition Gunnar raised his arm. Twenty feet away bones crunched under the brass handle-studs of the trench knife. Gunnar felt the impact up his arm, and then the snick as the double-edged blade plunged between two ribs.

Then he and Martha were alone with several dead Japanese and the body of a dog.

Gunnar felt a pulling sensation in his shoulder. The bloody knife surged toward him through the air. He looked down.

And he wasn't there at all!

"M—Martha!" he called unsteadily.

"Yes, Gunnar," her voice answered from nearby.

"Where are you?"

"Here."

"Where?"

He glanced wildly around. Her pistol was floating in the air beside him, and then by the light of a flash the Japs had dropped he could just discern the tenuous, transparent outlines of her figure. He stared.

She must have seen him too, for instantly she was completely invisible again.

"What the hell—?" he asked.

"I—I don't know." Her voice was shaky now. Her coveralls lifted themselves from the floor and fastened themselves.

"Get them off," he begged after one look. "I can see you that way, sort of."

Bullets had ripped through the garments and the rents disclosed large patches of *nothingness* inside. The result was both indecent and terrifying. Hurriedly she slipped them off.

"I can't see myself and I don't feel cold at all," she mused. "Are we dead?"

Gunnar had a practical mind.

"I don't think so," he decided. "I don't know what's happened to us, but if we can't see ourselves or each other they sure as hell can't see us either. And we're going to damn well take advantage of it. Their radar station, first."

They floundered out into a snowstorm, keeping together by the sound of their voices and an occasional touch of hands.

"I wish we had feet like snowshoes," he remarked, trying to break the spell of spookiness with conversation.

He felt a tug, a spreading, and found himself stepping lightly over the drifts.

"Judas!" he said in awe. "If we're dead, which place is this?"

THE confidential agent from Imperial Headquarters confronted the garrison's commandant. "You are a disgrace to the Imperial Army," he snorted. "You have the mentality of an Ainu."

"But Excellency—"

"Radar station destroyed. Coastal guns useless. Ammunition set afire. Supplies stolen. Sentries killed. But, instead of taking proper measures against these Yankee saboteurs who have very evidently sneaked ashore—due to more of your incompetence—you send us fables to cover your own deficiencies. Ghost hands. Ghost Yankees. All fables. Bah!

"That is as absurd as the idea of my own pistol rising from its holster by itself and turning upon me."

"Excellency," shrieked the overwrought officer. "Don't say such things on this island!"

The agent stared in horror-struck rigidity as his gun jerked itself clear, rose, and pointed. The gun spat twice, then floated rapidly across the room and placed itself gently in the commandant's trembling hand.

The headquarters bodyguard rushed in and jumped at conclusions as they saw their superior's body. Their crossfire cut the unfortunate commandant almost in half.

The major who was second in command stuck his head in the doorway for one

horrified look. But when something unseen in that room of death laughed harshly in triumph he dashed hastily out again, screaming frantic orders. . .

. . . Yark was unhappy. The majority reaction was profound shock at the realization that the great Yark was not infallible.

"What shall we do?" a mental voice asked.

"Destroy him!" The response was overwhelming.

Yark recoiled. Erg was his masterpiece, and to destroy him would be to acknowledge utter failure. But his very status as a Great Brain was now in jeopardy.

"It will be difficult to reach the real, the actual Erg, submerged as he is beneath his false schizophrenic personalities, but through me it can be accomplished. . ."

"...We'd better get some clothes on," Martha said bashfully. She could feel her outlines showing again. For the past couple of days it had become increasingly difficult to maintain complete invisibility. She and Gunnar were both beginning to *flicker*, to appear dimly and then vanish again.

"That's right. I'm beginning to feel the cold again, too." Gunnar was a gentleman and spared her modesty. "Whatever it is, it's wearing off."

The island lay several hours behind them when Martha glanced around once more at Gunnar's apparently empty clothing and the dent the weight of his body made in the rubber boat. She gave a little squeal of surprise this time, for the dent and the clothes were occupied — by Gunnar, solid and in the flesh.

He looked, and saw her, too. For a minute, neither said a word. . .

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on two of the cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish PLANET STORIES. They need no introduction to you, unless you're new to PS's pages—in which case step right up and meet Ray Bradbury and Henry Hasse, both of whom have stories in this issue.

As I have pointed out innumerable times to friends and readers I am not responsible for my stories in any way, shape, or form; Leigh Brackett writes them all for me. I only collect the checks. This has been going on for years, and

don't you wish you had a set-up like mine? I merely lounge about, sucking languidly upon my water-pipe, occasionally flicking Miss Brackett lightly across her curvesome spine with my riding crop, and letting her worry about whether in the

next scene of the story we shall have the hero or heroine wrestling upon a polar bear rug or a leopard skin. Sometimes this causes a bit of a crisis. Different types of rugs make a great difference in the tone of a story, you know, and we sometimes spend days ruminating over this problem.

When Leigh Brackett is not writing my stories for me, it is usually Henry Kuttner. Kuttner is a harmless sort of a fellow, usually seen a few paces to the right of the nearest pile of cigarette butts, nervously fretting his moustache. Kuttner turns out at least two stories a year for me and keeps my *hookah* replenished with imported mineral water.

It is only fair that at this time I mention Ross Rocklynne. He does my "problem" stories for me. We are now collaborating on a story in which the hero must work out a mathematical formula for kicking his way out of a *gigantic* paper bag. It is a story of *immense* possibilities and that dry rattling sound you hear is Mr. Rocklynne over in the far corner thrashing about in a large paper jerkin into which I have just sealed him. After this story we are considering the possibility of doing a yarn on some space-voyagers lost in an *improbably immense* Cyclopean latrine. I refuse to reveal any of the plot at this time. You'll have to wait.

Now we come to Robert Heinlein, Jack Williamson and Edmond Hamilton. I must admit Heinlein escaped me some years ago and has been busy at more important things, but there was a time when he did some of my sociological stuff. Williamson has been a problem; he is a tedious, thoughtful worker and spends sometimes as much as six months on one of my stories. Then, by George, he turns about and sells it under his own name. Footling of him, isn't it?

Hamilton is something else again. He has turned out two million words for me in the past month. He's slipping. It used to be three and sometimes four when I kept him supplied with sherry.

I believe that lists pretty well the members of the Corporation. My writing has been a series of double plays, much in the famed manner of Tinker to Evers to Chance of baseball history. It has been from Kuttner to Hamilton to Brackett to Heinlein, with Rocklynne as gargantuan substitute, and Williamson issuing forth a gentle word of praise on occasion. Writing has been a series of richochets and pursuits. The above-named authors are lean and rangy from long years of flight through the rear exits of walk-up apartments when Ray Bradbury walked in the front door with a new manuscript held in his teeth.

You understand now, don't you, what a snap it has been? When you have good friends such as these to do your work for you, how can you fail? You can't.

Oh, yes. I was born in Waukegan, Illinois, in 1920. Kuttner was only seven at the time, so I doubt if he had anything to do with it. Though there is some talk of Hamilton, who was a more mature lad of fourteen at the time. Eh?

—RAY BRADBURY.

How is this done? You mean you want to hear all about my harrowing adventures, including the time I stumbled across a spaceship in the steeps of Tibet, belonging to the Ganymedians who had just arrived, and they asked me where were all the Uranium deposits, but I wouldn't

tell, so they captured me, but naturally I escaped and gained control of the ship and went to Ganymede and thwarted the invasion of Earth and that's the way I get all my plots—first hand. (Gee, wouldn't that be swell? Unfortunately, not more'n half of this ever happened to me.)

So, maybe you'd like to hear about the best-seller novel I did this year and sold to M-G-M for 75¢? (I'd like to hear about that, too; when it happens, please let me know!)

You might say I'm of the "Gernsback school"; my earliest remembrance of STF as a hobby dates back to 1927. One of my teachers caught me reading a STF mag and confiscated it (she's probably a fan now!). I read and collected every item of the type I could find. Told myself I was going to write it "some day." Sure enough, upon graduation from high-school I procured a typewriter, wrote and sold a couple of—sport stories! The STF came later. I "dabbled" as a writer over an appalling number of years; even now I find myself too often facing those barren mental stretches when everything I try to set on paper sounds corny as hell.

Writing of any kind is work, hard work. But there's nothing I'd rather do. Sole ambition is to *learn to write*. Am currently engaged on a complicated and very ambitious mystery novel, but—whattaya know!—science-fantasy insists on creeping in. That's all right, too. I've never subscribed to the idea that writing, because it is invested with scientific symbols, automatically becomes possessed of new and more precious values, nor that STF is the least difficult of the art because of the great realm of imagination on which to draw. I do believe that *good* STF demands all, if not more, of the skill of fine writing and characterization and realism than you'll find in any other form. I devoutly believe that STF will very soon emerge as a definite, dignified and important form in the literature of our time.

I don't suppose a sketch is complete without the following:

I am currently (and, so far as I'm concerned, permanently!) residing in Hollywood. During the lean and the good years I have been, variously, sign-painter, hobo, stock-clerk, married, candy-maker, in Government Service, photographer, divorced, salesman, motion-picture "extra," etc. These I considered as mere stop-gaps between periods of writing and learning to write.

My tastes run to the heavily classical in music, Merritt-Lovercraft-Shiel in fantasy, as well as Huxley, Henry Miller, verse of Edith Sitwell, chess, the little red-headed (oops! how'd that get in here?).

Description: look up any of my heroes. Handsome of feature, muscles of iron, mind of lightning, noble of bearing. Now picture just the opposite, and that's me.

Pet story of my own: I haven't written it yet. I can honestly say, though, that *Final Glory* would come mighty close.

Pet peeve: editors who mercilessly cut the last three pages of my stories to make room for the tootsie-roll ad.

Pet query: are STF fans crazy because they're fans, are they fans because they're crazy, or, on the other hand, is the opposite contrary to the vice versa?

But don't get me wrong. I like fans. I like everybody. I like people.

I even like editors.

—HENRY HASSE.



Its massive length coiled and uncoiled savagely about them.

MOLJAR planted his columnar legs wide apart beside the dying saurian and blinked blood and sweat from his eyes. Only slightly strained after

three hours of the Red Moon Games, his seven foot height of Terran-Martian muscles gleamed damply in the blazing arc lights of the Colosseum. His lungs sucked



PRINCESS OF CHAOS

By BRYCE WALTON

The howling, slaving mob in the blood-spattered arena hated the half-breed Moljar—prayed gibberingly for his death. But Moljar looked coldly up at the Princess and licked dry lips. He would not die—while she lived!

hungrily at the dense Venusian air as he waited for whatever would next be sent against him, the champion of them all.

Through sweat-blurred vision he watched the climbing tiers of eager spectators, a high curvature outlined against the crimson

mist. Red Moon Games! Bi-monthly slaughter, ordered by the Princess Alhone when the unnatural filtering of the reflected sun's rays spread a carmine glow through the fog.

The grey sands of the arena were daubed with sprawled forms of monsters and men alike. Out of the shambles, Moljar's black barbarian eyes shone as they swung up to fix on the Princess Alhone where she sat with a retinue in her private observation box. Her grey-furred, semi-human body glimmered softly beneath the blue-glowing effulgence that always bathed her in its royal cold light.

Her heavily jeweled paw raised, dropped. The signal.

A roar of sadistic anticipation swelled, echoing from the misty range of hills, beyond Venus Port, out across the Sea of Mort that washed its marble walls.

Moljar shifted toward the gates. His hands flexed about the alloy bar. At Princess Alhone's gesture, the gates across the arena lifted. The monstrous beast, somewhat resembling a Mesozoic saber-tooth tiger of Terra, charged out straight for Moljar in a blinding burst of speed and power.

The half-breed swung the pitiful weapon which had jokingly been granted him, a five-foot length of compressed alloy. It cracked against the giant cat's skull. Moljar leaped aside as the beast plunked on its face, rolled in a flurry of sand and blood. Tendrils of gore oozed from its shattered skull as it lumbered erect and charged again, erratically now, circling and leaping down toward the arena's far end, blinded and roaring in pain.

A SIGH of ecstasy rose up in a long drone from the spectators—a polyglot of Solarians who had paid eighty credits for this night of vicarious blood-lust. Wealthy interplanetary aristocrats and cartel magnates, Mercurian and Martian speculators, Terran monopolists, adventurers and adventuresses from many worlds, muckers from the asteroid mines. All imagining themselves to be Moljar tonight. All hating him because he was a half-breed.

Of the half-thousand prisoners who had been marched into the amphitheatre—a few Terran mutants, many half-breeds, and space pirates who couldn't pay enough

hush-hush credits—only three remained standing. The Terran girl mutant, Mahra, who had helped him slay the saurian and who had rare courage. Himself. And Gasdon, the Martian pirate, who, barehanded, was still battling the giant squid in the arena's synthetic quagmire. His yellow body was a panting, straining bulk beyond the tendrils of sulphur dioxide that bubbled up through the bog.

Moljar felt the Terran girl's hot breath on his neck as he waited for the pain-maddened cat to scent him down. His glittering eyes turned and met hers. Her silver mutant's hair glowed beneath the merciless glare of the flood lights. Her full, yet agile body wriggled in its brief trappings in nervous preparation for the cat's rapid return from the end of the arena. But when she spoke to Moljar her lips curled with obvious distaste.

"You fight well, for a half-breed," she said.

His teeth shone white in what might have been either a laugh or a snarl. "Go to your Martian outlaw. Gasdon's pure of blood. If he'll have you—mutant!"

She laughed sharply like shimmering glass. "I'm Mahra. I stand alone."

"You'll die alone," said Moljar, "if you stand by me."

She tossed her head. The cat was bearing down, shrieking in blind hate. "You think you've won, barbarian. Wait 'til the *kristons* are turned loose on us."

"I wait," said Moljar simply. "I've waited a long time, and I can wait forever. And someday I'll kill her. Alhone's pelt I'll have and give to my people to whom I pledged it."

His blood-spattered arm swept aside as the giant cat ploughed past in its sightless, pounding charge. He swung his bar again. It crunched through tissue and bone and brain, and the cat dropped suddenly like a stone. Its sleek gold and black body shivered and twitched as it died.

He planted a sandaled foot on the carcass and raised his face toward the Princess Alhone's royal booth. Reluctantly, a smattering of applause rose. Princess Alhone's silky furred body was standing now. Motionless.

Moljar's voice rang out clear through the mist. "Moljar waits for worthy opposition. He is bored."

"Dirty half-breed dog!" howled a voice. Thousands joined in a thunder of obscene and filthy epithets.

Moljar laughed loudly. He saw Alhone's slim alien form tense as the saber tooth's had before a charge. And he began walking toward her across the blood-stained sands.

He paused as she raised a jeweled paw again. Moljar's eyes narrowed as the almost invisible vibrational force-wall rose up before the spectators and the rim of the vast arena.

"*Kristons!*" screamed Mahra behind him. "The wall protects the audience."

He heard the high whirring whine of the huge tri-winged, armor-plated insects as they were released into the arena. They dove and circled, maddened by the miasmic death vapor overhanging the stadium.

Like a trapped beast, the half-breed turned this way and that. Beads of sweat stood out on his heaving chest. He wiped his sweat-slippery hands on his leather tunic, then dried them in the sand, before he gripped his alloy bludgeon again. Then with the long eerie cry of the wild desert tribes he sprang into the air to meet the hurtling drive of the *kriston* that had singled him out.

The blinding speed of its wings distorted his perspective. The alloy bar, caught in their blurring motion, spun from his stunned hands. He cursed as he fell beneath its flight.

Dimly, he heard the joyous roaring of the throngs who watched him fall. As he rolled aside he heard Mahra's frightened scream. He felt the spearing slash of the *kriston's* poisonous barbed fang. His arms whipped out, hands closed on the horned tip. He was on his feet heaving outward. He felt tendons rip and a sudden freedom as the tongue tore from the *kriston's* throat. Its death cry sounded like escaping steam.

He was running toward the outcast Ter-ran girl who was dodging the worrying darting movements of another *kriston*. He swung the grotesque whip-like tongue of the one he had slain as he ran.

He stopped. The creature attacking Mahra suddenly became a lifeless charred hulk. The other *kristons* were plunging into the sand, smoking, burning. His eyes swung up. The force-wall was gone. The heat ray on the roof landing above the catacombs had destroyed the *kristons* be-

fore their work was done. The heat ray was only used for emergencies. What had moved the Anghorians to save them?

Miraculously, the three still lived. Moljar, Mahra, and the Martian outlaw Gasdon who had blinded the squid by punching out its eyes. Having no scent faculties it was flapping tentacles helplessly in its phosphorescent bog.

AN AIMLESS HUM of fear and hysteria exploded outward from the throng. They were fleeing from the stands, trampling, yelling frantically, some burning their way through the choked exits of the Colosseum. They were jammed in its elevators, blocking its corridors and archways.

Gasdon came running toward Moljar and the girl. His towering body, dripping mucous from the squid battle, was as large as Moljar's, but lacked its agility and integration of movement. His ugly face was twisted in fanatical purpose.

"Now we fight!" he shouted, "for her! I've wanted to meet Moljar, the half-breed freak, before witnesses who will testify to your defeat."

Mahra laughed. "Morons. I'll choose my own lover. And I certainly can't imagine him being either of you!"

"What witnesses will see you, Gasdon?" asked Moljar. "They run for their lives. Their pure hearts pump thin water."

A loud speaker blared:

THE MISTMEN! VENUS PORT IS UNDER ATTACK. TAKE TO THE JUNGLES. MISTMEN HAVE DESTROYED VENUS PORT COMMUNICATIONS. THEY ARE SACKING, PLUNDERING, KILLING. FLEE FOR YOUR LIVES! THE MISTMEN! VENUS PORT HAS BEEN ATTACKED AND . . .

Mahra trembled with uncontrollable fears. Her mutant's mind clouded over with the significance of the descending terror. Gasdon, his egomaniacal feud with Moljar forgotten for the moment, shivered, and his green eyes probed the thick cloud blanket.

Moljar's intuitive senses stirred darkly. Mistmen. Scourge of Venus, super-scientific pirates, they appeared mysteriously out of the fogs to loot and kill. Protected by force shields of thick grey, impenetrable

mists, they appeared in sudden ruthless violence, sacked, slew, and vanished into the unknown land that spawned them.

Now, they were actually attacking Venus Port!

The stands were empty, except for the dead and dying who had been trampled or burned by the stampeding crowds. They and the Princess Alhone, amid her personal bodyguard. She was standing now, her slender, evil grace swaying in the ever-present blue glow.

She motioned to Moljar. He trembled. "This is the time," he said very low in his throat like a growling dog. "I have waited long."

He strode across the reddened sands towards her. Her yellow cat-eyes veiled her study of his approach. Her feral body leaned tautly as it waited. The half-breed looked up. She was only fifteen feet above him; he could leap the distance.

Her high mewing voice said, "They have dared attack Venus Port! If they continue, they will soon be undisputed rulers of my planet. Soon, with such boldness, the Mistmen might even rule the System. Moljar, would you like freedom?"

He shrugged. "Can a half-breed ever be free?"

"On Venus, I have but to speak to make any being free."

"Try telling the Mistmen that," said Moljar boldly. "They'll soon be here."

"I've never, in all the places I have been, seen quite such a magnificent fool as you, Moljar. Anyway, our communications are cut off. If a man could get through to Anghore, bring back a force . . . my scientists in Anghore have been perfecting a new vibro-generator as a weapon. Perhaps it is completed now. The Mistmen have never been attacked. They surprise, throw up detectors and shut off communications, and disappear before any reinforcements can arrive."

Moljar's fingers quivered for her slim throat. But his voice seemed calm. "Could one get through their detectors to Anghore?"

"You perhaps could. If you can, Moljar, I'll make you a Guard of Anghore."

Stolid as was the half-breed's neural circuit, the sudden statement momentarily shocked him. It was rumored that Alhone chose certain fighters to go to Anghore.

But that he, a contemptible half-breed should be promised a position as Alhone's personal guard . . .

"Why me?" he was saying.

"In these games I have seen the best fighters of three worlds. But I have never seen anyone fight as you fought tonight."

A series of thunderous explosions rocked the stadium. A brilliant pyrotechnic display glittered fantastically through the thick cloud layers above Venus Port. The Mistmen were storming the city with customary thorough and savage efficiency. The crying of a helpless city in pain rose and fell in an aimless pattern of terror.

MOLJAR noted the energy guns held in the hands of the Anghorians surrounding their Princess. This was not the time. One aggressive move from him, and he would be annihilated on the spot. If he accepted her proposition, got through to Anghore and was rewarded as she promised, then he would surely eventually be placed in a fool-proof position to kill her. Time meant nothing. He had worked and waited many years. Many more would not matter—if they led to the fulfilment of his pledge. Only her death mattered. Revenge. Her pelt, well cured and soft, presented to his tribesmen.

The Mistmen were sweeping toward the Colosseum. The roar of their advance increased rapidly. He must decide.

Anghore. Over this outlaw world of blood lust and savagery, ruled Alhone. Thousands of his kind who had migrated here had been slain under her sanction. But who, or what, was Alhone? What and where was Anghore? Out of the numerous strange and unexplored lands of Venus she might have come. No one knew. There was only a name. Anghore. Anghore that lay somewhere across the Sea of Mort.

A few claimed to have seen Anghore—from a distance. A jumble of towers spearing into the mist higher than the mountain peaks. Only Princess Alhone and her ferocious minions knew of it. And no one talked with them.

Alhone ruled slave followers with weapons of basic energies as strange in origin as Alhone herself. Followers who, in return for their unquestioning, dogged devotion, held positions of great personal power. In their rich trappings, they ruled

over private little spheres of influence, answering only to Alhone.

Who was Alhone?—Where was Angshore?—What would he become should he accept this offer? None of these things mattered. Sometime, somewhere, he would have the opportunity to strip that soft furred hide from her quivering body—and no personal price he might pay would be too dear.

"Well, Moljar," she was saying. "Doesn't my offer interest you?"

He controlled himself well as he nodded. "I'll go to Angshore, wherever it is."

Her round pink face crinkled. "You are so certain, barbarian. Few have crossed the Sea of Mort. It is well-named."

"I will go to Angshore," he repeated.

"Then you should hurry. The Mistmen are outside the stadium now, and I'm sure they would like to find us here. At the other end of the stadium, above the catacombs, is the gyro-scout. For emergencies in the games," she laughed. "It has seldom been used. Take it. Its directional beam is already set for Angshore. It will take you directly there. If you have the key."

Moljar flexed his shoulders. His eyes were narrow, suspicious. No one ordinarily could break through the Mistmen's detector bands. Then how could *he*? He shrugged. At least he would be free for a while.

Alhone removed the gleaming yellow stone from one of her semi-webbed fingers. She dropped it to him. "This will open the gyro to you. It will function only under this stone's influence. It will also, if you reach my castle, open the gates into Angshore. You shall be rewarded, Moljar—bountifully."

His eyes fastened on her throat. "Yes," he said. "I depend on it." He slipped the vibrant, throbbing yellow stone on his smallest finger. He stepped back and then a tremendous blast of energy surged against him. The blue field which enveloped the Anghorians was beginning to fade. A stabbing pain lanced up his spine, up into his brain, to explode there in a flash of wrenching agony. He stumbled, went down.

The blue field blurred, swirled, deepened in color. It became a vortex of violently churning silver shot with fire. A nauseous weakness spread through him. The Anghorians, the stadium, the whirling blue fires, all faded.

HE OPENED his eyes slowly. It was raining. A few fat warm drops were spattering down, then a curtain of water spilled from the stadium wall. Shamefully he climbed to his feet, shook his head, looked about warily for Mistmen.

If he had blanked out it had only been for a few seconds. The blue field was gone. And with it, Alhone and her sycophants. Instinctively, he jerked his hand up. The yellow ring-key was gone. He bellowed bitterly. And a laugh answered. Gasdon!

He turned. The Martian outlaw had one arm around the struggling Terran girl. She was biting and striking and cursing, but with no effect. She writhed helplessly under his arm. There was a yellow flash on the outlaw's other hand as it raised, clutching an alloy bar. Gasdon had taken the key!

The half-breed swept a defense bar from a gladiator's stiff dead hand. Gasdon laughed fearless scorn, threw the girl from him, and met Moljar's rush with his own bar upraised. They crashed together with a dull clang, parted, struck again. They circled warily, feinting, parrying, thrusting...

Mahra's scream rang out. "The Mistmen! Coming into the arena!"

Moljar's eyes darted toward her. Beyond, far across the sands, were a number of grey vaporous spheres. Within their depths, dim shapes, indistinct, blurred, moved in a steady ferocious intent toward the three.

"Fight!" yelled Gasdon. He charged toward Moljar again. His face was twisted insanely. "We're doomed anyway. Defend yourself!" His broad yellow face glowed with obsession as he sprang. His alloy bar whirled in a singing arc, which was unwise. Moljar dropped beneath the level of the bar, punched savagely with the end of his own. Gasdon screamed hoarsely as the blunt end sank into his solar plexus. He staggered back, trying to lift the bar. Moljar swung downward, sank his bar halfway through the Martian outlaw's heavy skull.

Quickly Moljar retracted the yellow ring. He yelled at the girl. Then they were running together across the death-littered amphitheatre. Rays of force might have burned them down easily, but for some reason not then known to Moljar, the Mistmen did not fire.

They darted through an unguarded archway, up through level after level. They were still running easily when they reached the roof landing above the catacombs where the monsters of the games were kept. The long low hangar's panel slid open when the ring was applied to its invisible photo-electronic reaction mechanism. The gyro-scout's panel and instruments also were activated by the ring of Alhone.

Moljar hesitated, grinned at the girl. Her silver hair shone like dewed metal. "You are following me? A half-breed? A slave?"

"I'm not following anyone, not in the sense you mean. I'm with you, that's all. I'd have to fight alone, otherwise. That would hardly be intelligent of me, would it?"

"Hardly," he said. "Come on." The gyro-scout lifted automatically, straight up through increasingly thick cloud-layers, until it shot suddenly forward, straight like a bullet across Venus Port and above the Sea of Mort.

A radabeam and an automatic pilot was in complete control. Moljar turned to the Terran mutant. Her taut face was trying to pierce the dense sheath of cloud.

"This is a strange dream, Mahra."

"Dream?" She turned her weird eyes on him briefly.

"What else? A half-breed, child of a Terran woman and a Martian outlaw, travels across the Sea of Death with an outcast mutant." He shook his head. "And for Alhone we fly. For Alhone, the she-monster whom no one knows, to Anghore where no one has ever been and returned."

"Is it far across this death trap?"

"I've heard that in miles it is only perhaps a hundred. But in perils—"

The girl said abruptly, angrily, "For Alhone! You're crazy! If we can take control from the automatic pilot, we could—"

"We can not do that," said Moljar. "We would only crash down there. It's bad...down there."

She fell silent. The atomic motor whirled almost silently, driving them toward Anghore.

"There is great mystery here," said Moljar. "We seem guided by forces beyond our control. Some powerful, invisible wind."

CURIOUS, nervous, Mahra's rummaging uncovered weapons beneath the gyro's seats. Two electro-blasters and a duelling dagger. They each took a pistol, and she gave the half-breed the long slim knife. Then, when she sat down, her bare shoulder rubbed slightly against him. And remained there.

His flesh tingled. His hand gripped the electro-gun tighter in his hand. "Why do the Terrans hate you mutants so much?" he asked. "Are the rumors about you mutant's deadly powers true?"

She sighed. "Perhaps some of them are true. Anyway the Normals are very scared of us. That's why they isolate and scourge us. We can rule them when we decide we want to."

"Will you want to?"

"Perhaps, someday. When the time is right."

"I am neither ruled, nor do I wish to rule," said Moljar.

"You half-breeds are a strange tribe. Too bad you must all be such barbarians, such savages."

He smiled grimly. "We are what we were made. Somehow, the offspring of a Martian-Terran union results in much larger, much longer-living stock. We were envied. Much as you mutants are on Terra, blessed with double-life compared to Normals. We were driven into the deserts, reviled, imprisoned, beaten. There aren't many of us left. Of those thousands who sought to migrate here and find freedom, Alhone's games wiped out all but a few hundred."

Her voice sharpened. "You found her attractive! You know you did! You swore to avenge your people and bring her pelt back to Mars. Instead, you run errands for her!"

His shaggy black head turned. His eyes blazed with hate into hers. "That alien slut! It was a way out of Venus Port. It will lead me to her again. I could do nothing there."

She sulked. He sensed the slight trembling of her arm against his, and smiled. "My vows cannot change. Someday her pelt will hang in Ankhar's trophy cave."

She screamed. Her lips quivered as she raised a hand over her face. "Will you?" Her voice shrilled. "A *gruoon!*"

Moljar's stomach knotted. He had not

even time to fire. The giant flying croc was plunging straight into them. There was a tearing impact. The gyro wobbled. Then the controls went dead. The little ship buckled, vibrated as though the winged crocodile was trying to devour it, rend it with its claws. Then the crushed blades released their hold, and the gyro spun down in a fluttering spiral.

Moljar had time to jam his electro-gun and a small magnetic compass into a bag of water-proof plastic and belt it to his waist before they crashed violently into the Sea of Death.

II

THE TRIBES from which Moljar came were fatalists. Moljar accepted the fact that he was face to face with imminent death. Very well. If there was a way out, he would find it. If not, he would go on to Khles, where dead warriors go. And from Khles he would fight his way into the eternal paradise of Perlarh.

He had expected the gyro to float at least a few minutes. But it sank almost immediately. The shock of the crash had knocked Mahra unconscious; pulling her against the suction as the gyro went under was a herculean task. The crumbled wreckage went down. It left only a tiny whirlpool in its wake.

Mahra's consciousness returned quickly after a few dunkings in the tepid water. She was in his arms, her silver hair floating out over the dull glassy sheen of the water. He treaded easily, looking about. They could see a few hundred metres but beyond that narrow radius, the cloud blankets became an impenetrable fog. Patches of seaweed, lichen and rotting debris floated silently by on the torpid water, giving off a phosphorescent glow that reflected weirdly against the backdrop of mist.

Nature seemed to have stopped breathing. The air was heavy, oppressive. And the high humidity and heat, unrelieved by any wind, was weighty and pressed on them.

"Can you swim?" he asked.

"Quite well." Her hands were on his shoulders. They clung a moment, then shoved away.

Treading water now as easily as he, she asked, "How long do you give us to live? Not that it matters."

"The future is a mystery to me," he said. "Maybe a second. Maybe a hundred years."

"But you'll admit we've no chance now! Soon hordes of sea monsters will scent us out. Surely you'll not deny that this time you will go to meet your barbaric gods!"

"Who knows?"

She cursed him thoroughly. "You're mad!"

"I am Moljar."

She sighed resignedly. "You say that like omnipotence would say, 'I'm God'."

"It is enough for me. Who can say they know of more than themselves? I simply know I am Moljar. I live. I have purpose. The pelt of Alhone. A pledge I must keep. Beyond that—nothing."

She tossed wet hair from her eyes. "Maybe your barbaric code is best after all. The System's returned to barbarism. Decay, ruin. Why not a philosophy to fit it? I rather like you. If you only weren't a half-breed."

He grinned. "If you only were not a mutant." His eyes caught a dark, flat floating object some distance away. A blurred, indistinct outline. He pointed.

"Looks like something large enough to float us," she said. Then she cried out suddenly and pointed over his shoulder.

His knife was in his hands as his legs churned him around in the brackish water. The sea-serpent's flat head arched high above them, dripping an avalanche of weed and water upon their upturned faces. Its sleek, sinuous body shot upward, a monster with fanged jaws and darting forked tongue, with bulging eyes, and bony head and snout.

"Keep diving," yelled Moljar. "It won't open its mouth under water." He watched her surface dive like a fish, then followed himself just as the bullet-like head of the hissing hydrophidian slashed down.

Its massive length coiled and uncoiled savagely about them. The water was a churning white foam. Moljar tried repeatedly to sink his knife into the underbelly of the serpent. But it was like soft but tough plastic, only slightly resilient.

He broke surface, gasped great gulps

of the dense air. He saw Mahra and pointed to the right toward the flat raft object they had seen floating there. He yelled. "Keep diving and swimming toward that." Then he went under again as the serpent's head slapped into the water where his own head had been.

It was a world of phosphorescent glimmerings like monstrous fireflies, bubbling and coruscating about his staring eyes as he battled the boiling currents stirred by the serpent. He swam until his lungs were shrieking with agony, then came up again for air. He was only a few feet this time from the floating area. It looked like a collected mass of debris now.

He swam frantically toward it. If he could get up out of the water, he could break out his electro-gun. He looked around for the girl. Her head bobbed up. But still some distance from him. The hydrophidian hissed angrily and struck again. Her silver hair disappeared beneath the serpent's mouth.

He drew himself up onto the raft. He had a quick second of appraisal as he tore the gun from its plastic wrappings. The raft was solid, very buoyant, and membranaceous. Its surface was glossy and veined like the broad leaves of the swamp lilies.

How thick this raft was, how it was made, or how much more of it there was Moljar had no time to think about. But he did know it was alive!

The girl came up a few metres from him this time. Her arms moved weakly. Her face was deathly pale and her eyes pleaded silently beneath the bizarre strands of her silver hair. She again started to sink wearily down as the serpent hissed hungrily and struck.

This time it would have feasted. However Moljar's electro-gun crackled, and its lethal charges burned the monster's glistening length into pieces. They fell writhing in separate anguish all around the girl, crimsoning the water to a thick red.

He lifted her easily up onto the raft-creature. She sank down in a dripping and exhausted heap.

"For a half-breed," she whispered between gasps, "you have courage." Then she closed her eyes. The raft rippled and bucked slightly as something huge stirred against its bottom.

THE NIGHT HOURS before morning were illuminated, a strange twilight of phosphorescence. They sat in the middle of the organic raft and waited tensely. The stirring beneath it had grown more violent.

"Man isn't the only highly adaptable animal—not even the most ingenious." The girl's tone was pedantic, amazingly learned. Moljar nodded surlily, not so interested, apparently, in lectures. He edged toward the girl until their shoulders touched. She paused. Continued.

"The animal that build this raft for itself is hiding beneath it now. The serpent frightened it. Soon it will have to come up for air."

"How do you know so much," he growled.

"Earth University of Interplanetary Fauna," she said.

He sneered. "A mutant!"

"My parents dyed my hair, and with another name I got by for a while. I was going to be a field worker, but they caught up with me. They always do. Anyway, as I was saying, this creature is much like an ianthina, or snail, of earth. It breathes through a siphon, or tubular proboscis. It uses this siphon to suck in air with which it builds these rafts for itself, to keep its heavy body and shell afloat. It's an adventurer like you, Moljar. It spends its life floating or sailing about like a ship."

Moljar grunted. He moved one corded arm behind her. She shifted a little.

"Very interesting thing," she said. "Biology. When this ianthina decides to build its raft, it exudes a sticky mucous over the surface of the sea, layer after layer of it. Then it draws air into its siphon and permits the bubbles to escape beneath the mucous to which they cling. These air sacks imprison the air as the mucous hardens. And we have this very strong raft, a life boat with air tanks. Aren't we lucky?"

The raft jolted violently. "Are we?" said Moljar. "Maybe it does not want to share its raft."

A number of tentacles slithered up and over the edge of the raft. Two antennae with slimy knobs stood up and quivered at Moljar.

The girl tried to ignore the sight. "But

this raft is better than any man has ever been able to build." Her voice tightened as more of the ianthina surged into view. "This snail can make more bubbles at will, and it can enlarge its raft whenever it wants to."

There was a sudden upsurging height of gigantic pink-fleshed bulk. It rose up until it towered over its raft. A little above the level of the water they could see its brilliantly colored spiral shell-house gleaming olive-green with streaks and spots of purple, violet and black.

The body of the ianthina continued to exude outward from its shell. From it a thick tendon of flesh spread out to either side to form the frame work of its raft, an integral part of its giant body.

"We've got to get this craft moving somehow toward Anghore," said Moljar.

She stared at him, open mouthed, and then said, "Is that all? How will you summon your genii, or is that you?"

He shrugged. "It must be done. We are wasting time. First we must burn this shell away from the raft. It encumbers us."

She was shaking her head as he crouched on his knees, leveling the gun at a point beneath the ianthina's waving antenna. He was about to press the stud, then cursed and fell sidewise beneath the long descending squeal.

ATTRACTED by the glow of the ianthina, a monstrous bat had dived suddenly toward them from somewhere up in that dense grey curtain. Neither of them saw its giant webbed wings until it fanned them like an abrupt deadly wind.

"Burn it!" scream Mahra, as the bat's hideous evilly grinning mouth opened to reveal rows of yellowed teeth, and its gleaming red eyes bored toward them through the mist. "I lost my electro in the water."

Moljar was shaking his head. He tossed her the blaster. "You. Burn the ianthina free from the raft." The bat had sped by, circled, was returning. "This bat can do us some good!"

Moljar stood up and met the sweep of the bat's flexing claws. Just in time he leaped upward between them, and clutched the bat's thick furred belly. He felt the ratty teeth clack shut behind him as he was

raised upward into the swirling vapor.

His nose curled, and he choked with the stench of the beast's vermin-infested fur. Then, still gripping the coarse hair with one hand, he raised his knife with the other. A quick long slash brought a fearsome scream hissing in his face. He slashed again and again until the probing blade found the beast's heart.

Gore spilled over him as he clung to the now wet hair. It got too slippery to hold. He grabbed the flailing claws as the gasping, thrashing creature plummeted seaward. The bat's body flopped into the water not far from the raft. It beat futilely with one foot, spinning in weakening frothing circles. Suddenly it was dead.

Moljar worked frantically against time. The blood would attract every kind and condition of sea monster. He hacked and strained at the joint where the huge wing joined the body. The stench almost overpowered him as he floundered about. But finally the great ribbed wing came free. Moljar's breath was coming in deep gusts as he dragged himself up onto the raft and pulled part of the wing up after him. He sat on it to anchor it while he rested.

He looked at the girl. She nodded. "You're pretty brave, for a half-breed."

He grunted breathlessly.

She came closer and handed him his blaster. "I burned it away. I burned its ganglia first, which it used for a brain. Then I severed the tendons which fastened it to its float. Anything else?"

Moljar was up again now, hacking at the thick tough surface of one end of the raft. "Yes. Watch that bat wing. Don't let it slide away. It is what we must have to reach Anghore."

"What are you doing now? And what's the wing for?"

He answered carelessly, "I'm going to make us a sail from the wing. It is almost a perfect sail of its kind. I figure the gyro brought us half-way across the sea. Maybe we have a third of the way to go." I have a compass and I saw what direction we were following before we crashed. With a fair wind, and luck, we should reach shore within a day."

She stared with no attempt, now, to conceal her admiration for the barbarian. "For a half-breed," she said, "you've got a brain."

Moljar said nothing. He had finished digging the hole in the surface of the raft. He next cut long strips of leather from his tunic for rigging. The twenty-foot-high leading edge of the bat's wing, a high curving spar, he stepped deeply in the hole, like a mast. Soon they were moving through the fantastic sea before a slight, lethargic breeze.

Their blaster protected them many times from the countless varieties of sea and air creatures that constantly attacked them. Moljar devised a sea-anchor by cutting off one of the air sacks from beneath the raft, and tying it to one end of a long leather rope. When the wind blew in the wrong direction, he threw out the sea-anchor.

There was little difference between night and day, except that the phosphorescence dimmed and was replaced by a grayer, more sickly light. And the high, gracefully-curved membrane of the bat's ribbed wing arched above them like the bizarre rigging of the junks that ply the Martian canals between the ruins of Phreer and Sumph-Logan. Black, with veins of dried blood, it caught the wind and tautened like the black sails of ancient pirate craft.

But though they could fight the monsters that flew and swam about them they could not fight the sea itself. The sea is cunning. It can bide its time, and spring with more violence than the greatest beast. The wind was its ally.

It was late the following afternoon that Mahra's hypersensitive nerves detected the distant pounding of the surf against high crags. They both visualized the dark mountains of Maghrone where the dull spires and minarets of Anghore towered up from its granite sea wall thousands of feet into the mist.

The thunderous surf grew in volume to a steady roaring as their makeshift craft bore them shoreward.

Then, abruptly, Moljar's nostrils quivered. He leaped to his feet and his black mane matted and curled as his eyes strained upward. "The cloud layers," he said. "Look!"

Each cloud layer was moving rapidly in different directions. "A storm!" cursed Moljar. "The wind and sea will pulp us on the rocks!"

Mahra cowered down, clutching at the

floor of the raft. One hand gripped the bone mast of the bat's wing. She reached up the other, and Moljar's broad yellow hand closed over it, and held it in a silent bond.

The sound of the descending storm came from afar. It rose higher and higher, reaching the pitch of a thousand shrieking giants. A colossal comber bore toward them, lifting up, and up. Their eyes followed its curling summit, helpless, bold pygmies. A wall of blue, foaming with white like a mad beast, translucent as they saw it towering up through the swirling vapor. Then it collapsed over them.

Moljar's hand gripped hers. A vise that all the frenzied pounding of the ocean could not break. As the tons of water crushed them down, shattered the raft, hurled it away like chaff, their hands were locked. Their ears rang. Their minds cried out and were smothered. Coughing, blinded, they were absorbed by the sea.

III

THE DESERT TRIBES of Mars cling to ancient superstitions. When a warrior dies, his body can only go on to Khles. A grotesque land of trial by brute strength by which the victorious can move upward through succeeding plains, and finally into the fairer lands of Perlarh.

So when Moljar's battered consciousness returned somewhat, his cracked lips whispered it gently, with awe. "Khles... Khles... Khles..." Then he snapped open his burning eyes.

He was on his side on harsh gravel and grey sand. The sea, calm and glassy again, washed gently at his sandaled feet. He stiffened his aching legs, and a lassitude went through him, like one might imagine upon awakening from death. He raised his right hand and the brilliant, sentient aliveness of the yellow stone caught the filtered Venusian morning, and momentarily blinded him. He shifted his eyes and saw that he still gripped Mahra's hand.

Her long smooth body, bruised and lacerated and encrusted with salt, breathed with a slow, erratic rhythm. Her other arm lay across her high firm breasts and her slim fingers rested on his forearm.

He turned his head up the beach. It

might well have been the hell-lands of Khles that towered there. The smooth sloping expanse of gray sand ended sharply in a wall of granite, cracked and hoary with age. It went straight upward, higher than Moljar could see.

The girl groaned, raised on an elbow. He turned. They looked silently at each other a moment, before turning their eyes back to the colossal sea wall. Simultaneously their eyes caught the broad towering gate of dull black metal.

"Anghore," she whispered.

His hand dug into the sand. His lips were thin lines of dark wire. "It is magic," he said. "Even the gods are prejudiced against half-breeds, or I'd say they lent their strength to ours."

"Only evil gods would guide us to this place," she said.

"We have our gods who are not known exactly for benevolence. Lumphoor. Ghyx."

Moljar climbed stiffly to his feet and lifted Mahra. They stretched sore, wrenched muscles. They ate the ample meat from the many types of shells strewing the beach, and all the time they had been eyeing the giant, formidable barrier. Then, with silent accord, they walked up to it and stood dwarfed before it.

"You can leave me here," said Moljar. "I have pledged. I must return to kill Alhone. But you are free."

"In this jungle? Free for death! I'll stick a while longer, half-breed."

Her hand crept into his as he raised the yellow ring-key. A faint humming, a hollow metallic clang, and the gates slid to either side into their granite walls.

They stepped through into a massive cavern. A cold maw of twilight, green haze and smooth arching walls veined with ruby red and gold. Mahra cried out softly, and Moljar cursed as the two giant furred male Anghorians ran toward them.

Each wore a long straight sword and a slender dagger at his side. Their pink cat-faces masked cold, sadistic evil. Alien. One reached out a paw-like hand at Mahra. His almost lipless mouth slid open, and the incongruous whining speech mewed its travesty of human tones.

"This woman has not been called. She does not belong here." He turned to his fellow. "Take her to the Matrix. Ghils

is experimenting with the seventh plain. She will be useful there."

"You are to come with me," he said, turning to Moljar.

The half-breed's hand rested on his dagger. He had fallen instinctively into a half-crouch. "How did you know I was coming here?"

"You will learn many things about Anghore. You have much to learn."

"I'm stubborn about my subjects, and my instructors," growled Moljar. And, as the other Anghorian stepped toward Mahra, Moljar leaped at his throat.

As his left hand clutched the corded body, his right hand whipped the cat man's dagger free. It rested harshly now against the furred man's broad silken chest.

"Do not touch the girl," he warned in the small pointed ear.

The other catman said evenly. "A dangerous act. But excusable. You have not yet learned the formalities of Anghore." He moved in a blinding blur of speed. Mahra gasped, as his body streaked across her vision like a flash of light.

MOLJAR went back. The catman thudded against him. His head cracked against the stone wall, and the red tint of the glowing stones deepened to a more personal crimson. He cursed harshly. These catmen could move! Shaking the dimness from his head, he tried to grip the Anghorian's writhing body. His dagger raised and fell, but only found hard stone. He blinked, trying to clear his eyes of fog, and his own blood.

He heard Mahra's savage, despairing yells, and caught a glance of her struggling in the other catman's corded arms. He heaved upward. The catman flew off him like a filthy conscience. Moljar flattened against the wall, his dagger crossed before him.

And when the catman leaped again, the half-breed was prepared. His clearing vision focused this time on its feral darting movements, and he met that pink snarling face with a long right slash. The pink face crunched, smeared. The big body sheared around, buckled, plunged down. It twitched, and its paws swept about searching for Moljar. Moljar kicked the face until the body stopped moving.

The other Anghorian released the girl.

He drew his sword and eased toward Moljar.

A VOICE said with cruel, morbid interest, "Bring the half-breed to me alive, Akare. Or you will accompany the girl to the seventh plain."

Involuntarily, Moljar yelled, "Princess Alhone!"

Whining, squealing laughter echoed through the vaulted cavern. Baffled, the barbarian whirled around searching for the voice. It seemed without source.

"Alhone," he said again desperately. "You here! How?"

The gloating laughter again. "I have never left Anghore, mighty Moljar, since it was built for me. You and all the other fools outside Anghore have seen only my projections. You are foolish to fight now. Allow Akare to bring you to me. Leave the freak girl. I wait."

"Wait," said Moljar. "The girl stays with me."

There was a long painful pause before the Princess Alhone spoke again. "You have passed the many tests that only a few survive."

"Tests?" said Moljar.

"The Red Moon Games are but testing grounds. The survivors become my warriors here. You are welcome, Moljar. You will be the greatest among them. But this—this girl has signed herself away to the seventh plain by entering here. You had better accept this compromise, Moljar. You have much to gain. Otherwise, both of you will go to the seventh plain together. I would hate to lose you, Moljar. I would make you a Jehlak of my Guards. Forget the girl. Accept. You will be far greater than those who have scorned you. They will be your slaves."

He hesitated, then said, "I am Moljar. I only compromise when it pleases me. The girl stays with me. I care nothing for your plains, whatever they are. Send us to the seventh, the thousandth. It means nothing to Moljar."

The voice mewed merciless laughter. "Your rugged independence has ended, half-breed. You can be overpowered instantly by any one of many of our energy weapons. There is much duelling here, so, by decree, only swords are worn. Otherwise my warriors would soon decimate

themselves. But for stubborn aliens we have other methods."

"Is talk and crazy laughter one of them?" said Moljar. "I am not impressed."

He turned. His eyes sought Mahra's. She stood proud and tall, her breasts moving with controlled breathing. Only her eyes held deep, crawling fear. Here was dirty mystery. Alhone and her minions who had watched the Red Moon slaughters—a three-dim projection from her eyrie here at Anghore. He remembered again that all her public appearances had been surrounded by the blue glow. His brains spun. He shook his blood-encrusted hair.

His decision was a natural projection of his own character. He could not have acted otherwise. He moved in a sudden leap sidewise. One arm encircled the startled catman's neck. The Anghorian could have eluded him, and offered battle. But he had not. Apparently he awaited direction from Alhone. He held his dagger to the quivering side. The fur was silky, soft beneath his fingers, inviting violence.

He raised his head and shouted, "Moljar waits. Does the girl stay with me? We will die before we part."

The voice was a petulant whine now. "Fool. You will not die. You are here to serve me. I am not served by corpses."

Akare made a quick, lightning-like jerk from Moljar's grasp. The half-breed sank his dagger in to the hilt, ripped sidewise. Then he leaped away, covering the girl against the wall. A stream of bright thin blood spurted from Akare's pulsing side as he crawled toward the far side of the cavern, mewing with pain.

Mahra's hands clutched Moljar's shoulders as they crouched against the coruscating colors of the veined granite. Her breath came in short, jerking gusts. "For a half-breed," she breathed, "you have honor."

Her hands stiffened, dug into his skin. Moljar's hair bristled on his neck. Intuitively, he raised his dagger, though it was a useless, silly gesture now.

From the far side of the cavern, moving ghost-like from a massive opening, a dense vaporous sphere floated toward him. It eddied and pulsed, and in its center was the dim outline of a human shape encased in plastic, its head hemeted by a faint glowing light.

"A Mistman!" Mahra gasped. "Moljar..."

The half-breed had no time to think. Capture or death would find him moving, though there seemed no hope in it.

A yellow beam of light slashed outward from the man in the sphere. Moljar dropped beneath it. But it caught the girl full. His eyes saw her stiffen into a hard stone mannikin and tumble forward. From his hands and knees he sprang upward like a maddened beast, straight toward the pulsing heart of the Mistman's vaporous shell.

There was one rending burst of pain. Then an explosion that seemed to shatter his brain. Its million floating fragments drifted through blackness.

IV

HE WAS AWARE of low chanting rhythms, the blood heating throb of unknown instruments. He stirred and found himself wallowing in a bed of incredible depth and softness. Heady scents that twisted his soul with sweet pain floated across his face, and his wild barbarian heart was instinctively repelled by the suggestion of sensual, soft decadence.

When he opened his eyes, oscillating lights bathed him in sense-drunkening sweetness that sickened even as it lured. He turned his head. A boudoir out of the abyss of a drug dream. Black drapes littered with flashing jewels. A black floor that seemed to undulate with sentient life, mosaicked in red veins. Weirdly-plumaged birds with serpent's heads hissed in a golden cage.

And Alhone stood by his couch and sang to him.

When she spoke, her voice had been unpleasantly whiny and shrill. But now, singing the dissonant cries of some alien song, it was high and piercingly sweet like a violin's cry. Small furred breasts rose and fell gently as she sang. Lithe hips swayed. Her cat's eyes searched his with a cruel dreaminess, and, for him, there was no malice there.

Small, delicate, fine-limbed monster from an alien hell. At her command thousands had died horribly during the Red Moon Games. Trampled, drained of blood, shredded by talons, poisoned by fangs, tor-

tured, flayed and inflicted with unspeakable indignities worse than pain. Yet she possessed the sadist's love of beauty, of decadent riches, luxury, sensual surroundings, and love.

He arose with one fluid motion and faced her. His body had been bathed and scented with perfumed oils. His trappings were new, the grey leather of the Anghorians. A long sword swung at his side.

"The Mistmen are yours," he said. "And this has all been a trap to get me here?"

"Yes. You are mine now, as are all the others. We have ways here to control the heart and the mind of those who are not quite willing to accept me. I have employed these methods often."

He inhaled deeply. His chest swelled. And a wave of almost overpowering ecstasy swept him in a surging tide of passion. How many years he had waited for this one supreme, delectable moment of revenge!

And now he was alone with her. And there was nothing to stand in his way. Or was there? She was no fool. She must have protection. He could see nothing.

His eyes clouded as he looked at her. That haughty body would soon writhe and scream under his hands. And before she died she would know the full meaning of torture.

But first he would learn the nature of this mystery. "Where is Mahra?" he said. "And what is the seventh plain?"

"Our scientists call them plains," she ignored the first question. "But they are really worlds coexistent with this one. We have explored six of these worlds. This, Venus, is the sixth. I and my kind came here from the second."

Moljar blinked. His barbarian mind was quick to accept the strange and the marvelous. It was not at all unbelievable that these Anghorians had come not only from another world, but from another dimension of existence. A coexistent world. It was only unexpected.

"All matter and all chronosophy are one and concomitant," she said. She swayed toward him. "Our scientists perfected the Matrix which can synthesize matter to any of these various worlds or plains. It changes the consistency of the atom, much as a lens magnifies objects to fit the perspective of your eye."

No longer able to control himself, Moljar stepped to meet her, flexing his hands and trembling violently. She must not get suspicious until it was too late. Until he had her between his hands.

"And why do you stay on Venus? Why do you kill us, and ravish this world?"

"My world was drab, colorless, uninteresting. It was so dull there. Our civilization destroyed the past which was lawless and exciting. I came here. And from the Red Moon Games I have gathered about me here at Anghore all the greatest warriors in the System. It was wise of me, do you not think so, Moljar? The planets themselves helped me. Terra and Mars weeded out the best by isolating the half-breeds and mutants. Then out of these, I select the very best, by a process of elimination during the Red Moon Games. From the best among the survivors of the Games I choose the Mistmen. And from the Mistmen I choose you, Moljar, to rule by my side. The Mistmen can conquer the Universe."

"Many have dreamed of such a conquest," said Moljar.

"This is no dream. We have inexhaustible power on our side. Weapons we can unleash that would stun the System into passive madness. Defense they have no conception of. And, if we had to, we could fight from the vantage of other plains of being, of which the dullards of the Solar Worlds have no concept, though these countless worlds flourish all about them. Work by my side, Moljar."

"Why me?" said the half-breed. "I am not of your kind."

"No Anghorian could stand against you with equal weapons, Moljar. The best of two worlds flows in your veins. Your heart is metal fibre, and your brain has never known fear. Nor could it ever understand defeat. There is no other who could stand by your side. And when I tire of the empire we shall build, and move on to other plains of entertainment, you may stay and rule. You can be King of a Universe, Moljar."

"None of which is so important as keeping my pledge," said Moljar. He clutched at her slim, throbbing throat, but again he had forgotten the extra-system origin of these non-humans. Her body was an unspringing coil. She landed light-

ly ten feet away. A high piercing shriek of frenzied rage and frustration sputtered from her pink, snarling face.

"Savage!" she finally said as he came toward her. "You have gone too far!"

"Not far enough yet," said Moljar. He leaped after her. She eluded him as he dodged after her doggedly. She sprang this way and that like a forest cat. And finally she stopped and her fingers briefly touched the wall. Panels slid noiselessly apart.

"You asked about the girl," she spat. "Look!"

Moljar froze. There was a square there revealed. A mass of electronic equipment. Parts were vaguely familiar, but over-all arrangement completely beyond the grasp of his barbaric desert mind. Within a column of light, stood Mahra, looking at him. Fine glowing filaments imprisoned her.

Somehow, through the weirdly glowing strands that would send her into some hellish land only Alhone could name, she managed a wan smile. Beyond the glowing filaments, grey-furred catmen moved dials and studied gauges and charts.

"Wait!" cried Alhone's grotesque mewing face. "Turn off the matrix power. Do not send the girl yet. Moljar wishes to accompany her to hell!"

V

THE THREE CATMEN complied without comment. They apparently were highly specialized brains, incapable of normal reaction. Their faces reflected mechanical minds, specially bred, unemotional. Moljar's narrowed eyes followed the motions of one as he turned dials. The light faded from around the girl. The filaments faded to a rusty brown. Mahra's eyes turned, looked directly into Alhone's. A shiver went through Moljar at the strange glow that emanated from them.

Clanking of steel spun him around. The Anghorians whom Alhone had summoned were crashing into the small room, and Moljar sprang to meet them. His sword whipped free, darted, an invisible arc. He killed the first one who came within reach before the Anghorian's sword could move, his straight blade splitting the pink skull.

He saw one raise a peculiar looking

device like an electro-gun, though smaller. He heard Alhone's shrill cry, "Swords only! I would watch him fight once again. Before he goes away."

Others joined the Anghorians. Martians. Terrans. Half-breeds. Their eyes were dull, and they fought without heart.

Moljar sidestepped a thrust, even as he parried one slash, and slipped under a third. His black eyes glittered like a basilisk's and his lips froze in the Martian tribal smile without mercy.

His sword darted past a blade that sought to parry. It sheathed a foot of its length in a Martian's belly. He gasped agonizedly and went to his knees. And another, a Terran, swept past him, lunging savagely, raining blow on blow so furiously that Moljar countered only with superhuman effort. He retreated warily before the cursing, sweating, yammering warriors, coolly parrying thrusts and strokes and watching for his chances to kill. When possible he kept articles of furniture between him and his attackers, while his sword circled, fluid light.

They were dying one by one. Moljar sensed something wrong. Why? Surely Alhone had seen enough of this final exhibition. Soon it would be too much. Already only two of her Guards remained. And they were wary, not aggressive, playing for time. They were waiting for Alhone's order to employ their energy weapons. But as he charged in, flailing, slashing, she was withholding that order. Why?

Moljar parried one wild-catman's blade easily and, on the rebound, felt his sword crunch, saw the catman fall to the side with his neck cut half through. But move though he might, he was too late to defend himself completely against the second and remaining Guard. He parried slightly, the sword struck a glancing blow across his head, and bit deep into his shoulder. A red mist gathered over his eyes. He lifted his blade like heavy metal, very slowly it seemed, saw it sink as slowly into the Terran's skull. It stuck there. Moljar, through a welter of sweat and blood, tried to withdraw it as the dead man sank down to his knees. But his weight pulled the sword, gently, it seemed, from Moljar's nerveless fingers.

He turned and lurched toward the Mat-

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rix. The scientists were standing in shocked frozen stances. The filaments about Mahra's body were still cold. Her strangely bright eyes remained fixed on Alhone's. Moljar staggered around, shaking his head, fighting the whirling darkness that threatened to choke out the light.

The Princess Alhone's eyes were wide, staring, as though hypnotized. Her body was leaning forward in a taut arc. Her hands were spread outward as though attempting to ward off some invisible power. Her mouth was open, twisting, but only faint unintelligent gibberish spattered out. But there was still a mad fanatic fire as she sprang at him, her taloned paws outspread, slashing at his face. He scooped up a long sword as she screamed.

"The Matrix! Turn it on and go. Send the girl to hell alone!"

He swung her arms aside, agony lancing his bleeding shoulder. As she twisted off balance, he wrapped one arm about her, and swung her off her feet, just as another detail of Guards hurtled toward him.

"Tell them to get out," he said. "Or I'll kill you."

She knew he would anyway, but she preferred less immediacy. He lifted his other arm, thrust the dripping sword point against her breast. She coughed something from her straining throat, and the Guards retreated hastily. The panel closed behind them.

"Tell your scientists—" he began, and stopped as her mewing laughter interrupted him.

He looked into the Matrix. The filaments were glowing purple. But the scientists were gone! He dragged Alhone's writhing body after him into the mass of equipment. A gigantic maze of meaningless tubes, wires, bulbs, dials, buttons and switches and coils. He cursed blindly. He could not turn off the Matrix!

"Mahra! Mahra!" Her body was faintly stirring beyond the now singing and vibrating filaments.

Between peals of piercing whistling laughter, Alhone was shrieking, "She will go to the seventh plain! The she-devil!"

Moljar could destroy the Matrix, but only a burning cataclysm could result from such an act. At least, even in the seventh plain, she would be alive for awhile, and perhaps he could bring her back.

Mahra was on her knees, now on her feet, swaying. She turned. Moljar flinched. Those eyes. They blazed, and held. She had gone mad. With a savage roar of pent up blind hot rage, Moljar clutched Alhone's neck and began squeezing it slowly. All his suppressed hate, his frustration, the years and perils of his long, long quest, his longing for revenge, was in the terrible strength of his fingers... but, without any logical reason, a thought entered his mind, restrained his hands... a faint far sound, but one of screaming urgency...

Don't, Moljar. Let her live.

HE SOBBED in frustrated rage. It was deviltry. He tried again to squeeze that throbbing neck, but his fingers remained frozen. Then the mental voice in his brain repeated, *Let her live, Moljar. This is Mahra. Let her live. She knows the Matrix. Mahra...*

He staggered back, blinking, shaking his head. He dropped Alhone. Her body thudded on the crimsoned floor. She raised up stiffly, her eyes staring widely, her arms trembling. She walked stonily to the Matrix and turned a dial. The Matrix's shrill humming, now almost beyond his auditory range, died slowly as the glow of the filaments faded.

Alhone adjusted some other part of the complex panel. The filamented threads lifted slowly until Mahra could crawl beneath them. She ran sobbing, and Moljar took her easily into the folds of his red dripping arms.

Alhone had turned. She looked at Mahra with that indescribable hatred burning a raw-edged flame in her eyes.

"So you mutants, some of you anyway, are telepathic. That is why the Normals fear you so. I am helpless here. Now. There is nothing for me to do but escape." Her hands spun dials as she talked. "I go to whatever plain waits my pleasure. I am tired of this one." She looked at Moljar through veiled eyes. "I have seen all I can see here."

While the filament threads dropped down, she ran beneath them. They began to glow, rapidly now, for the last time.

"I won't let her escape me now," said Moljar. "Even if we have to die with her." He hurled his heavy long sword,

directly into the blazing heart of the Matrix.

There was a crackling, then a thunderous growing roar of stupendous unleashed power. A blinding, glaring explosion sent Mahra and Moljar hurtling backward. Stunned, they staggered to their feet, supporting each other, groped for the panel out of the room.

A globe of burning white energy was expanding rapidly, eating up wall and metal and air with thirsting ferocity.

It devoured its own base and plummeted downward through the towering heights of Anghore. Burning, blasting, eating, destroying. It ate straight down into the bowels of the Venus beneath the Mountains of Maghrone.

Through the trembling, smoking chaos, the tottering ruins of Anghore, Moljar and Mahra blindly fought their way. The towering gateway was blasted as though by a tremendous electronic charge; they ran through the cavern and over the twisted gates and far up the beach of grey sand before they finally paused, panting, and looked back.

Anghore was a smoke-belching crater. A thundering volcano of burning energy.

They stood breast to breast, looking at each other. Half-breed and mutant. Outcasts. Scourged. Excluded and estranged. The hated and feared. Her eyes half-closed beneath his. Her lips parted slightly, and her body was soft.

"No wonder the Terran Normals are so fearful of you mutants," said Moljar. "The rumors are true. You can control minds!"

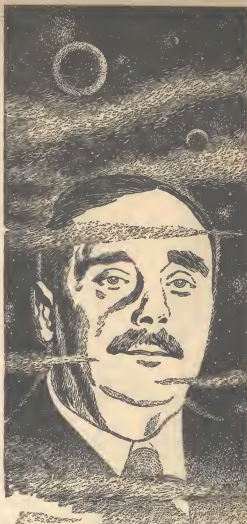
She nodded, eyes still almost closed. "Some of us can, sometimes. It isn't easy."

"Then why do you not rule them? If you can."

"If we feel like it, maybe we shall. Some day. When the time is right. Besides, we only want to rule those who deserve to be ruled."

His arms tightened. She submitted with a strange, eager smile to the pressure of his muscles. "Well," he said softly. "Is the time right? And do I deserve the honor?"

Against his, her lips answered.



In Memoriam. **HERBERT GEORGE WELLS**

..... 1866--1946
PLANET STORIES MOURNS
THE PASSING OF THE FIRST
AND GREATEST SCIENCE-
FICTION WRITER OF OUR
TIME... HE WAS FAMOUS
FOR MANY THINGS -- BUT
THOSE WHO READ *THE*
TIME MACHINE AND *THE*
WAR OF THE WORLDS
WILL REMEMBER HIM
BEST AS THE ONE WHO
OPENED FOR US THE
DOORS OF THE FUTURE.



THE VIZIGRAPH

Now it becomes plain what it means to be a PS editor and conduct the Vizigraph. Did we say conduct? Well, if the fox may be said to conduct the hounds, then we may claim the same with regard to the fans. (Now you'll all be writing in and saying we called you dogs!)

Our ears, as ever, are to the ground (yes, Junior, *both* ears—makes it easier to eat dirt!) and we are making three improvements with this issue which you-all have requested. Guess what!

People keep asking us to go bi-monthly. Lissen, if we had the paper, we'd go *monthly*! We asked you to out and chop us some wood two ish ago. Not even a teentsy-weentsy Sequoia or Douglas Fir has been brought in to date. So *there*!

Ole Hennery Elsner can go pick hisself an illustration; he won fust place. Chad Oliver got second and can choose two. Oberfield (shall we tell 'em the other news, Bill?), pick three.

PLANET'S LUGUBRIOUS POLYP

HAVE A GOOD YEAR, CHAD

1311 - 25th Street
Galveston, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

In lieu of the usual corn, my faithful Remington and I have a few comments that we'd like to make on PLANET STORIES, taking the long-term view of things. I certainly do not pretend (nor does my Remington, for that matter) to know more—or as much—about the construction of a magazine than its editor; these are simply observations for what they may be worth. Doubtless nothing.

In the first place, I consider PS as primarily an adventure-story mag, and think that it should be judged as such. I mean, of course, adventure as applied to STF and not the usual BLOODY TALES OF BORNEO type. The adventure story is one facet of science fiction, and has its place therein. Those who would sneer at it are forgetful of writers such as Kipling; the adventure yarn, too, can tell a story, portray a civilization, present an idea, or stir the emotions.

The writing in PLANET since its inception falls easily into four groups. These are, in the order of their worth: off-trail adventure fantasy, adventure science-fiction, fan, and hack. The latter, I fear, is most prevalent.

The most literate writer to appear so far among the Sacred Works is Ray Bradbury, who is in the first group. (He can hardly be considered a fan at this late stage.) His best story, and therefore PLANET'S, was *The Million Year Picnic*. *Defense Mech* (a story that many readers seem to have misconstrued completely, and *Creatures that Time Forgot* were also very fine. Leigh Brackett is second in importance. She is not in Bradbury's class—she writes in two dimensions, while Bradbury uses three. But she does *try* to be different, and her stories have influenced the field a great deal. Her writing suffers from a "tough-guy" complex—her

attempts to be realistic are superficial, and her choice of words which, in the hands of a Hemingway or even a James Cain would be effective, is nowhere.

One other writer in this class deserves a mention—Frederic Brown, whose *Star Mouse* was one of the few attempts at humor in STF that came off. It was a whimsical, gentle classic.

Among PLANET'S many adventure STFfirsts, the greatest was Nelson S. Bond. Who else produced two such tales as *The Ultimate Salient* and *The Ballad of Blaster Bill*? There were others, too, but those stand out.

PLANET has had a great deal of good fan writing. No single writer stands out, however, as definitely The Man. Your policy of giving the fans a chance is a wise one. You never know when a Bradbury will come along.

As for the hacks—well, easily the best of them is Ray Cummings. Yes, I think that some hack writing has merit. Cummings knows STF inside out, he has a nice style and a natural gift for writing, and is usually very good. (Not always, however—remember *Space Wolf*?) His main fault is that he has not progressed. His atom stories, his robot yarns and the dimensional hocus-pocus, the escape-in-space theme—all these were set patterns ten years ago. Set largely, it must be pointed out, by a gent named Ray Cummings.

The hack writers who continue to grind out quasi-humorous stories are simply quasi. They are your worst feature, and there are entirely too many such stories. For example, in the current issue, I turn the relentless ray on *Love Among the Robots* and *Breath of Beelzebub*. They are no worse than most of this type, but no better, either. This sort of thing has no place in science fiction.

Second worst feature: detective stories. And herewith a slam at Mr. Ross Rocklynne. I am a Rocklynne admirer from way back, and I remember vividly the early Hallmyer stories in PS. The Sandman—oops, I mean Sandhound—wasn't even good detective fiction, and as STF it is definitely r-o-t-t-e-n. Rocklynne, actually a first-rate writer, should be ashamed of himself. Likewise Carl Jacobi and The Nebula. Take 'em away!

Minor dislikes: the sentence, "she was clad in a dress of voltex, and the clinging material revealed every curve and contour of her figure". The thing has infinite variations, of course—that one is a quote from Jacobi's current *Tepondicon*. Really, Mr. Payne, can't you get them to inject sex a bit more subtly into their stories? These things read like the writer was muttering to himself now — I'll-put-a-little-sex-in-and-start-their-little-pulses-racing. My little pulse, by the way, slows down every time I read such a sentence. The other pet hate of mine is the word "guts". (Yes, I mean Brackett in particular.) It serves no purpose; it is jarring and out of place. When you get a Hemingway, as I mentioned before, well and good. Until then, kindly consign this word to the editorial ash-can.

Your artwork has been good, though not consistent. Frank R. Paul was tops—he did some of his best work for PLANET. The elder Leydenfrost was fine, and so was Hannes Bok. Currently I like Rubimor-Moore, though his work is lost on pulp paper. Your covers have, since Volume One, Number One, suffered from their trite themes. Execution thereof has been good, but there is no excuse for such juvenile covers. Finlay, perhaps, muddled through best. Currently, Martin has toned things down until the

current effort, which is lousy, among other things.

Malcolm Reiss deserves great credit for La Vizi, as well as for trying to give the readers what they wanted after that first horrible issue. It is the best letter department in the professional magazines, and you should be proud of it. Just for the record, the top letter-writer of all time was Isaac "Asenion" Asimov, who has since gone on to become a top author. (He even knocked off one for PS—who remembers *Black Prior of the Flame*?)

One suggestion more: you need more novellettes, or novels if at all possible, and less short stories.

Currently, the Winter issue boasts two fairly good stories, by Walton (despite its improbability) and Fox. *Space Bat* was a fugitive from a jungle mag., asteroids notwithstanding. Jones was very disappointing for such a fine writer. Jacobi's *Tepondicon* was too pat and the ending was old before Mr. Jacobi commenced depriving the world of oxygen. The interior pix are good—especially the one on Page 41. Moore can draw a woman plus.

La Vizi: Elsner (because he was thoughtful), Oberfield, and Jewett (because I enjoyed his letter). Aside to Gerry Williams: With the coming of atomic energy, either human nature changes or there will be no humans to charge about with their unchanged natures flaunted blatantly before the breeze.

Sorry this is so long, Mr. Payne. College resumes in a few days, and I had a lot to get off my chest, inasmuch as you probably won't hear from me again until the good old summertime. On which happy thought I take my leave.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER

HAVE TO MAKE A RULE ABOUT POETRY, NOW

865 - 20th Ave. So.,
St. Petersburg 6, Fla.

DEAR ED,

The orange-furred, eight-tentacled corpse of the rayed zwilnik slung across my massive shoulders, I staggered wearily across the Martian desert. For days I had seen no sign of life—save for the zwilnik, whose attack I halted by the disbeams of my atomgun.

But now even the atomgun needed recharging, and that must wait till I refound my space-rocket. The emergency food-rations were getting low, too. Y'he Norg, the two-headed man from Rigel/3 was a prisoner in the Tower of the Bat God at Yeolarn. And the graceful Princess Morona . . .

Wearily, I thrust these dismal thoughts from my tired mind. The glowing, purple blood of the blasted zwilnik trickled down my arms as I mounted another of the monotonous red dunes of hot sand. Might my spaceship lie beyond this dune? The radioactivity-detector dial on my space-tanned wrist showed a source of atomic energy somewhere close by.

I staggered to the crest of the dune of rosy Martian sand. And there, before me, in the wan light of a distant sun lay —

Was it a common Martian mirage? Or was it . . . cold perspiration beaded my brow . . . was it the Winter ish of PLANET?

You guessed it!

But before plunging recklessly into the dark interior of that weird dwelling-place of unhuman

galactic-mentalities commonly known as the Vizi, I wish to murmur a polite welcome, Mr. Payne, to STFandom. And also to thank Ye Ed for printing my missive a few ish ago.

Now to the Vizi. . . No. 1—Hank Elmsner, Jr. 2—Tom Jewett. 3—Chad Oliver ("What?" screams Ye Ed, "Again?") As for Monroe Kuttner—remember Planet's motto, Monroe: "All the nudes that're fit to print!" Unlike Herb Snedecker, I vote for a longer Vizi. The Vizi is the spice of Planet! Hurrah for La Vizi!

The cover was (heh heh) pretty darn good this time! Different for a change. Tell me, Ed—do you look at those covers or just clap 'em on quick to spare the eyes? Now to the inside pics: pg. 4 was fair. Clever style. 14, 29 and 41 were also good. Who did the ills, for *Tepondicon*? Also 63 was good. Good ole Leydenfrost!

The stories this ish were good—especially *The Man The Sun Gods Made*. It was a semi-classic. Fox's style is reminiscent of both DePina and Brackett. Good. VERY good!

Next comes *Love Among the Robots* and *Fog of The Forgotten*. More McDowell—his yarn was corny but cute!

The Seven Jewels of Chamar and *Example* are next. TSJOC was hacky in spots. But readable. Good for Tom Pace! His second yarn is twice as good as his first. Congrats, Tom. The other shorts were fair—but not up to standard.

An' now for some of my (heh heh) poetry. Don't confuse our product with imitators—look for the handy green-and-orange package.

P O E M

"EEK!" eeked the half-nude femme,
Dashing from the gruesome BEM.
On it came, with tendrils lashing!
Across the plain with fangs gnashing!

(pause for breath)
He seized 'er—but look! Here comes big Joe,
Atom-gun blasting at the foe!
This scene, I'm sure, you recognize
For many's the time it's met yer eyes.

(pause to wipe away a reminiscent tear)
The familiar cover plot of PLANET—
Many are the fans who often pan it!
But someday the BEMS will organize.
The heroes and femmes will union-ize.
Then PLANET will print her covers blank,
An' the fans can't say that the darn things stank!
(er—heh heh—stink doesn't rhyme)

How'dja like it, Ed? (he says, throwing out his chest and catching it on the rebound). Oh, that bad, huh? Oh, well . . .

And now, having successfully vanquished the monster, our hero exits right off stage.

Stef-ly yours,

LIN CARTER

DOWN WITH THE JUNIOR B. E. M.S'!

Box 6, Helena, Montana

DEAR EDITOR:

No, I don't think you are a "public leaning post"—it's obvious what you are, PaUl L. Payne: a PULP editor. That's been so obvious all along, —I'm surprised no one mentioned it. And, since I have started in the Vizigraph, I'll finish with it before going on to the stories.

So you're cutting out fan stuff—even to the addresses of your letterhacks? That's bad business, and I hope the move will be regretted—not that it makes much difference in regard to mail sent to me—for I'm well enough known that mail sent minus my box no. reaches me anyway. Or at least it used to.

The Vizi is certainly short this time—maybe

that'll give my letter a chance to win an original? I hope so! If Elmsner's letter wasn't so uninteresting, I'd give him a vote just for friendship's sake. Jewett's letter is too kiddish—grow up, Tom! As for Snedecker, it's obvious he knows nothing of fandom—and isn't anxious to learn. What fan cares about the fiction in the average scientificfantasy mag? It's the friendship and fun they're really after. Of course fans go for STF—but not the "average" variety. They've given up hope on that. Sachs is in Jewett's class—nuff sed. Oliver is in a rut. Oberfield is improving, but definitely, and Williams hits the "happy medium."

Now for the winners: No. 1, Walter A. Coslet (why, is obvious!); No. 2, Bill Oberfield (for his poetry as much as anything else)—and, No. 3, Telis Streiff (because he so neatly put it over on you and smashed your policy of no fan advertising—for the *Martian News Letter* actually is a fanzine, now in its 4th volume! and "the JR. BEMS" is the name of a national fan organization! Now, Payne, will you print my announcement? I've got you in a corner and you'd better not try to back out!) (*Nope—Ed.*)

The stories are easy to rate, this issue, and show signs of improvement (it's about time!). No. 1—Gardner Fox's yarn of a mutant in the galactic era, *The Man the Sun-Gods Made*: Title not very satisfactory, but the story is well worth reading; in fact it's one of the best items you've printed in ages! But, then, I usually always go for any fiction about mutants—somehow, there's something about their alienness and unique abilities that makes interesting reading. Likewise, I find the "galactic (or should I say *inter-galactic*) era" fascinating—if handled right. Martin isn't up to standard on p. 14 and Moore is even worse on the double-spread; but the cover! Aside from the inaccuracies (like the noose—not of rope, incidentally—being around Katha's neck), it is pretty fair except for the too space-bronzed skin, insufficient clothing (you know where), and the too-dark background (which would be satisfactory if it were only plainly visible).

No. 2—Ray Jones' *Seven Jewels of Chamar* (how do you pronounce that? Kaymar? Kam-ar? Tchaymar? Or Tcham-ar?) (*Ray didn't say—Ed.*): This is slightly above your usual "best" but was unfortunately hazy as to how the jewels became so widely separated (Will blunders never cease?). Martin did some right nifty illustrating for this yarn—too bad there's so little STF interest in them!

No. 3—*Fog of the Forgotten*, the delayed Basil Wells yarn: Not bad, not bad! But that Laydenfrost is even better, what with HoDyak and the drog! The second pic was not so good.

No. 4—Carl Selwyn's *Space Bat*: Better than average for a Planet yarn. That was sort of a new idea that Saturn's atmosphere extends out beyond its ring, but that would mean a great difference in atmospheric pressure between the "mainland" and the ring—which was oh-so-conveniently overlooked. Rubimor's two pics either reproduced awfully poor or they were nothing much to begin with—and one is inclined to believe the latter.

No. 5—*Love Among the Robots*—of all things! This was handled better than McDowell usually handles his material and I class it at the top of his efforts to date. I note one statement which connects this story with *Veiled Island* which he sold to another publisher. Who drew the pic? Rubimor? Don't forget I need this information. The robots are about the only well-drawn items

in the pic—and they are too dark. But I do thank you for the straight and even border.

No. 6—Sternig's back with *Breath of Beel-sebul!* (Not *Bub*, so don't go correcting that "L", please. If you doubt my authority for this change, check the word in the Greek.) (*The Britannica doesn't agree with you—Ed.*) And so we have another tale to add to the metempsychosis list! Will it never end? It would help, tho, if someone could puzzle out a really new twist. The story's weakest point was where Duneen sprouted delusions of grandeur. Unless, that is, one considers the illustration. Is this more Rubimor? And, if not, who? Answer my questions, please. (*Both by Astarita—Ed.*) Honestly, how could you accept such, yes, such a thing?

No. 7—*Savage Galahad* by Walton (not C. Alan). Definitely not!—for this story is weak, tho it need not have been. Insufficient alienness! And, to pick one other fault, what mumbo-jumbo is this about supersonic brainpower? Supersonics has to do with ultra-sound vibrations, not brainwaves (telepathy?) nor radiowaves. Kiemle's pic, though inaccurate, is fairly good.

No. 8—Jacobi's *Tepondicon*: Yes, it is perfectly obvious which door he opened, for the story would have had to be written with different overtones if he hadn't sacrificed himself. Again, unfortunately, we have a story that is hazy in spots. But who's your amateur Finlay? W-M-??? (*McWilliams—Ed.*)

And, bringing up the tail, we have fan Tom Pace with No. 9—*Example*: The story isn't quite clear but I think I get the point. I will raise no objections to the pic, but I would like to know who drew it. (*McWilliams—Ed.*) Re the FEATURE FLASH, what is C² in numbers and why? (*Any number, theoretically—Ed.*)

Your sincere critic,
"Coswal"

WALTER A. COSLET

HOW ABOUT THE SQUARE ROOT OF BRADLEY?

82 Westminster Drive, N. E.,
Atlanta, Georgia.

DEAR EDITOR:

Latet anguis in herba. Verbum sat sapienti.

The Payne we suffered when our Planet lost its White Horn grows hysterical. What was once the best Readers Column in any of the magazines now takes on the appearance of a floor-show in some cheap tavern. Cui bono? Ad captandum vulgus?

Telis Streiff, I ignore you. One does not stoop to comment upon badinage. Philously is the way a philodoxion moron would feel while standing before a mirror.

Gerry Williams adds that Pandoric touch which goes so well with the name of Epimetheus. The problem, dear Canadian cousin, is to provide modern sciences with a system of mathematics that will explain proportions without affixing seventeen college degrees to the end of every number.

Now you chillun be quiet while Ole Uncle Bob digs through his childhood memories for such one-syllable words as will be comprehensible to the illiterate readers of Planet Stories.

Once upon a time, before this intolerable Payne was visited upon us, someone wrote in to inquire about a contraption which its inventor claimed would count the number of times per second a woman changes her mind and thereby

provide an answer to man's greatest problem—predicting her ultimate decision.

Sherlock questioned the existence of any such machine and advanced the claim that mechanical inertia alone would prevent it from moving sixteen times faster than light travels—that being the approximate rate at which the average woman is known to reverse her opinion under normal conditions. When pressed for a reason the rate of change becomes incalculable.

Sigler put forth the interesting argument that the woman's existence proves the mechanical possibility of such a gadget, even offering to get out his welding torch and build one if he were furnished complete data on its construction. Oberfield had promised to test it and report through The Vizigraph.

Everything was clicking along nicely until specifications began calling for a set of baffle plates in the form of an exact square having an area of exactly one-half square inch. If they were made in any other size or shape the machine would refuse to function. Everything depended upon their being EXACT.

Euclid didn't know the answer to that one. Archimedes put in too much time searching for a lever. Pythagoras couldn't decipher the Egyptian symbol for that particular fraction . . . and the Egyptians can't remember where they hid it.

That brings our story up to date. Is there anyone in the house who can extract the square root of one-half so Sigler can complete this wonder-working machine every man is waiting for?

Nemo me impune lacessit,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY

FORD'S JEALOUS—NYAA!

4733 N.E. 17th Ave.
Portland 11, Oregon

DEAR EDITOR:

Last night, upon purchasing a copy of your usually mediocre pulp, I received a distinct shock . . . I might even say blow. At the risk of lapsing into the patois of the Vizigraph, may I go so far as to say that my eyes (baby blue) bulged in their sockets, my hair (golden tresses, if you prefer) stood erect, my chin (jutting, manly) plowed down my chest (ample) and lodged itself securely under my left armpit? Sir, with the true fearlessness of the new editor you have struck out across fields shunned by those less daring. Casting caution to the winds, you, my dear sir, oblivious of prejudices which would have deterred a lesser man, have, through your dauntless quest for the original, the new, presented a story which is the apex, in my humble opinion, of utterly illogical crud.

I refer, of course, to a story entitled *Savage Galahad* by one Bryce Walton who recently set himself up as a paragon, by inference at least, in the pages of your letter section. Mr. Walton encourages us to take the Broad Outlook befitting the Atomic age. Yet even Mr. Walton is not above taking the plunge into medieval thinking. In his yarn he would have us believe that the flames of holy passion are kindled in the breast of his monster protagonist by a human female because—check this—of her surpassing beauty. Are we to infer from this that the human figure (especially female) is a thing of beauty *per se*? Balderdash and piffle, dear sir. I grant you that the human female figure is appealing to the human male, but *only* because it is female, not because of any inherent beauty of contour and form.

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mad genius and the little man in the purple zoot suit. But on the other hand, look at me (no, don't, it isn't a very nice thing to look at if you have a weak stomach). I have to sweat and worry over a letter until it's finished and then it's never printed, anyway. (Gentle hint.) Oh, well, someday in the dim and distant future, maybe my prayers will be answered. See, here I am again, stuck for something to say. I guess I'll have to face the inevitable and take a look at the stories in the winter PLANET.

The Man the Sun-Gods Made was okay, but aside from occasional flashes of brilliance, the writing didn't seem too hot. The Seven Jewels of Chamar was pretty good, to my way of thinking. (That's right, septs, go ahead and sneer. I still say I can think. After all, "Cogito, ergo sum," as some philosopher once put it, can be used the other way around. Maybe.) The best among the "fascinating space-tales" as you put it, was *Savage Galahad*. This story really had a lot of merit, and I don't mean A. I think it's the best short I've seen in PS in quite a while. *Love Among the Robots* was good, and brought many a howl of fiendish glee to these slobbering lips, especially the last few paragraphs. *Tepondicon* wasn't so hot. Maybe some people like stories that leave you up in the air, but I don't. I like to feel a sense of satisfaction over what happens at the end, but that certainly didn't give me any. With a bad taste in my mouth, I turn to *Space Bat*. It was pretty good, but the plot didn't have much to offer in the way of originality. Maybe I'm being too harsh, but them's my sentiments, pard. *Fog of the Forgotten* was so lousy it was funny. I didn't even bother to figure out what it all was supposed to mean. Who knows, there might have been a terrifically important secret message in it, but I doubt it. *Example* was all right. So Pace crashed the prozines, huh. Maybe someday I'll write a masterpiece and send it to you for immediate acceptance. (Joke.) *Breath of Beelzebub* was apparently just something to fill up space. Having gotten out of the dank stench (or stank dench, whichever you may prefer), I turn with hopeful heart toward the Vizi.

For all I care, one Herbert Snedecker can take his business elsewhere and good riddance. No doubt he got a great thrill out of seeing his name in print and immediately rushed out and showed it to all his friends, if he has any—which I doubt very much. My friend of one letter, Chad Oliver, seems to be in good form, as usual. I've noticed letters of his in other mags (whose names I won't mention in these sacrosanct quarters) this month. Who knows, maybe he'll even find time to write me a letter. I bet if you jammed all of Telis Streiff's letters together minus all the little dots, you could fit it all on a postcard. I notice again, as did Telis, that the pic on page 128 is in its usual good form (and I do mean Form.) Tom Jewett's cute leedle opus seemed to me to be compounded of all the nutty fan letters I've ever read.

Ah, hark, the dinner bell doth toll. I must hurry downstairs and sink my teeth into the succulent morsels of thick red meat. Meat that cannot be bought at any store in the country. I have to trap it myself with the aid of a cleverly ringed sidewalk block outside my house. Cannibal ring that loud?

My vote for the pic-winners: No. 1, Chad Oliver. No. 2, Bill Oberfield. No. 3, Harley Sachs.

Sincerely,
JIMMY WHEATON

And even human standards of beauty are purely arbitrary, transient, relative, a passing fancy. The frumpish Goya nude, for example, would be a spectacular flop at any present-day bathing beauty contest (taking for granted that she would be properly attired in a bathing suit, of course). The Gibson Girl with her pouter-pigeon bosom and bulging bustle would fizzle out miserably at any contemporary social gathering. Yet she managed admirably in her own setting in the Nineties (yclept Gay). The female Ubangi is given to stretching her lip over a platter and doubtless the male Ubangi considers this the epitome of feminine perfection else there is little probability of the appearance of little Ubangis. From the standpoint of the male crocodile, his female counterpart is obviously a creature of ravishing beauty since the species has not yet gone out of fashion along the Nile, despite the female saurian's lack of beauty of contour and daintily-rounded form. And still Mr. Walton causes his "savage Galahad" to go blissfully along experiencing undying devotion for a female of an alien species, rather than for one of his own. Balderdash, I repeat. This fatuous belief that *homo sapiens* is the highest and most beautiful of God's creatures possible is the same type of narrow egocentric thinking that had the entire universe revolving about the Earth in the Middle Ages.

In closing, I humbly suggest that Master Tom Jewett (Great Ghu, to coin a phrase) and Master Telis Streiff (our "Aarrg . . . eek . . . pant pant!" boy) consult their neighborhood psychiatrist at their earliest possible opportunity, if they are honestly the perpetrators of the worthless rot appearing in your pages over their names. Great Ghu, indeed.

Sincerely yours,
W. R. FORD

DON'T WALK PAST WHEATON'S HOUSE

DEAR EDITOR:

I just don't see how he does it. Chad Oliver, I mean. Somehow, he always manages to think up some gag to put over his letter, such as the

23 Montclair Ave.,
Verona, N. J.

FROM SNEARY, THE FENLY HERMIT

2962 Santa Ana St.
South Gate, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR PAYNE:

So no club news, eh? QS, that's your tough luck, but I can still tell you what I think. As my friends always tell me, I'm a big thinker. (Of course, some don't spell so good.)

There are two things that I want you to change, or rather change back. First the little adds scattered around through the stories don't look neat. Not those cheap ones anyway. Put them together on the back pages were they belong or at the end of a story. They make the mag look sloppy.

And second, print the full address of the letters hacks. You will never miss that extra line it takes to do it, and a lot of warm friendships have been made by young fans writing to fans who's address they see in the pros. I know, that is the way I got started. Bring 'em back.

Now the cover. I see Martin's-mussel-man is still with us, this time with a coat of gold paint. By the way, that other fellow is either 8 feet tall or the girl is only 4 and a hafe. She would only come up to his chest. Only inside pic worth anything was the one on page 41. Tho the Lendiefrost one wasn't to bad. Why must fantasy artist draw so fantastically? I've seen some of the other mags Fiction House puts out, and they people, in their way, better pics than you. The heave look like they were people. Even the comic books (that I used to read) put out by your boss had a few better covers. I wouldn't say the pics were bad, but they could be better, if you know what I mean.

Say haven't we had quite a few of these supper-savage men them? Fox's *Engens of the Gods* of a few issues back was a lot like *The Man the Sun Gods Made*. At least the herro was. I't a good story, but well I don't know, seemed things happened sort of easy. A much better story was *The Seven Jewels of Chamar* which had all the thunder of an old space-opera, yet with a reather tuching ending. I must say tho I almost quite hafe way through. At a couple points Jones got a little to much like the old West. Elsnor my have a point. I like space wars still, but let's not be so corny about it. And why the heck call their guns lances? Shades of King Arther.

I see were Planet is trying it's hand at *Lady and the Tiger* type stories. *Tepondicon* was a pretty good story, and well done, but thos kind of ending always bother me. WHat happens next? I always wonder. To write the story the fellow would have to be alive, yet he pictured himself as some what of a hero. Aaaaa fap. A pox on unending stories.

Of all your shorts (stories of course) the only one that was reather falt was *Love among the Robots*. Which wasn't to bad.

Feature Flash was very good. How about more of that kind. Better still have two. One about a fan, the other about eather a writer or grate man. Spekking of writers, how about doing one on Bradbury. I met him at the Pacific and he is a swell guy. And oh yes, your eastern reads might be interested that we in LA still see the Guy Gifford cartoons. He does a little series for the LA bus and streetcar lines weekly paper, given free to all riders. I'd like to see him in Planet again tho.

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These are only examples.
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provisions.

Aaaaaa as ever, we come to the VIZIGRAPH. And my votes for pics go to (No. 1) Elsner. A nice bit of thinking there. His views might be a little colored tho. I mean Technocracy has a long way to go before it can spread over the Planets, let alone the US. I've been talking the matter over with him by mail, and I've still to be made to see the light.

(No. 2) The next in line, Tom Jewett. He suggests holding the Fall cover back about 2 feet. I'd rather hold it back 20 feet, then take off my glasses. (I'm near sighted by the way, read to many Planets.)

(No. 3) Gerry Williams. His answers to Watson are almost my own words (If I had thought of them). I agree people as a whole change little. A dictator will always try to impose his will, if it is with a stone-club, a sword, tommy-gun or ray-pistol. And unless as Elsner believes, Technocracy dose away with money, there will be still a lot of people that felt they shouldn't have to work for it.

You my tell Sneedecker that there are a lot of fans that would stop buying Planet if they stopped printing the Vizi. In fact how about more?

Your's Fenly

"The Hermit of the Gate."

RICK SNEARY

PIXIE SACHS SOCKS ADS

208½ S. Mich. St.,
South Bend, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

On another of my favorite weekly excursions to the newsstand I looked . . . in vain! No mags! I returned to my hotel and read my mail. One letter said: Got latest PLANET . . . letters by Harley Sachs, etc. Harley Sachs? WHAT!!! That's me! I'm Harley Sachs! I returned to the newsstand. Yes, there it was. PLANET! A promag . . . but what's PLANET? My BB brain probed far back into my memory. Yes, there WAS a mag called PLANET. But it went defunct three months ago, didn't it? No, maybe the issues come so few and far between that I forgot about the mag. Well, like many others I raise my weak voice in a feeble cry for at least a bi-monthly mag. But I know it is but in vain and I sink back into oblivion.

Well, on the current issue. Cover: aaak! same old space man, but at least they put the clothes back on the BEMbabe.

I shall briefly rate the stories: *The Man the Sun Gods Made*—very good. Fox has created a character which is worthy of a whole series of stories. They could be called the *Sun God* series. All of the shorts were good, except *Example* which isn't worth mentioning. *Phooey*. *Space Bat* was a bit of a let-down after what I had imagined from the title. How can a bat that breathes fly in space?

The Visiscream was good, and this time I shall rate the letters. Someone is cheating someplace. The letter rules say that only two pages double spaced on one side of the paper is the requirement for letters. BUT NO! Elsner, Coswal (my old friend), Oliver and a few others seem to have overlapped a bit . . . even if they use legal size paper. Therefore they don't deserve a rating because they cheated. The winners are: Jewett, Streiff, Oberfield. I'd be third if I wasn't so shy as to keep my ego from voting for itself. Heh heh.

PLEASE mention FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE GROUP when answering advertisements

A long gripe about the ads. Here is a situation from one of your pages. (71): A poor fan reads for all he's worth. His tiny heart beats wildly and sweat pours from his pores. He reads: 'BACK INTO the welcome protection of the fog sea the Outcasts plunged, but now there were only three of them. For one thing Ho Dyak was grateful; the thinning network of *agan* afforded no . . . MAGAZINES (back dated) 5c and up! Cicerone's magazine center offers . . . safe footing for the hunting Drogs. "We die?" questioned Sarn . . . Get what I mean? Please put the ads on the back pages. PLEASE! Sob sob sob! Can we help it if we can't distinguish the ads from the stories?

And new the pics. Cover: better, but still aaaa! A wonderful color scheme. Page 4-5: for some reason I didn't like it. Page 14: good, but since when does a fluoroscope look like that? Page 29: good! Page 41: not so hot. Page 48: the claws of the bat were slightly twisted but the pic was good, though a little black. Page 61: good, too much black. Is that Saturn in the background? Remember, they were IN Saturn's ring, not outside it. Page 63: good. Page 70: fair. Page 73: fair. Page 77: good; the story reminded me of the last Monster a while back. It was excellent. Page 83: I didn't like it. Page 90-91: Huba huba huba. Well, it was a swell issue and with this one I place PLANET at the top of my preferred STF list. That's all I have to yell about and, with a parting sigh I slowly shut the door to my cage. The spring lock snaps and I am safe from myself till next time.

STFantasyNCERELYours,
HARLEY SACHS

HE FELL THROUGH THE FLOOR

Route 3, Box 93,
Phoenix, Arizona

DEAR EDITOR:

I've finally reached the end of my rope . . . I've been reading PLANET STORIES for quite a few years now, and during that time I've never written in to the Vizi for the simple reason that it seems to be, with few exceptions, devoted entirely to the bouquets and brickbats of the opposite sex, (male, that is).

The straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak, was the letter written by H. Snicker-decker, Decknecker, or whatever his name is. Maybe it's the name . . . with a name like that, I'd be soured on the world too. Mr. Nickerdecker, you contradict yourself, or else you've discovered a unique way of getting your name in print. I can just see your mad rush to get the ish. of P.S. with your name in it.

Incidentally, did it ever occur to you that some people have opinions of their own about what they like and dislike? From the tone of your letter (it read like an ultimatum) we might be led to think that it is your twenty cents that is keeping the whole publishing company from going on the rocks. Talk about egotistical quarter-wits . . . Nuff said.

While I'm at it, I might as well get another weight off my chest . . . re the cover and inside illustrations. Really boys, do you buy P.S. just to look at the pictures or to read the stories? If it's just for the pictures, I can recommend several of the simpler comic books. Honest though, why be forever riding the poor artists? I shouldn't have said that—you can't strike



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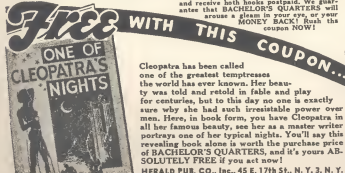
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